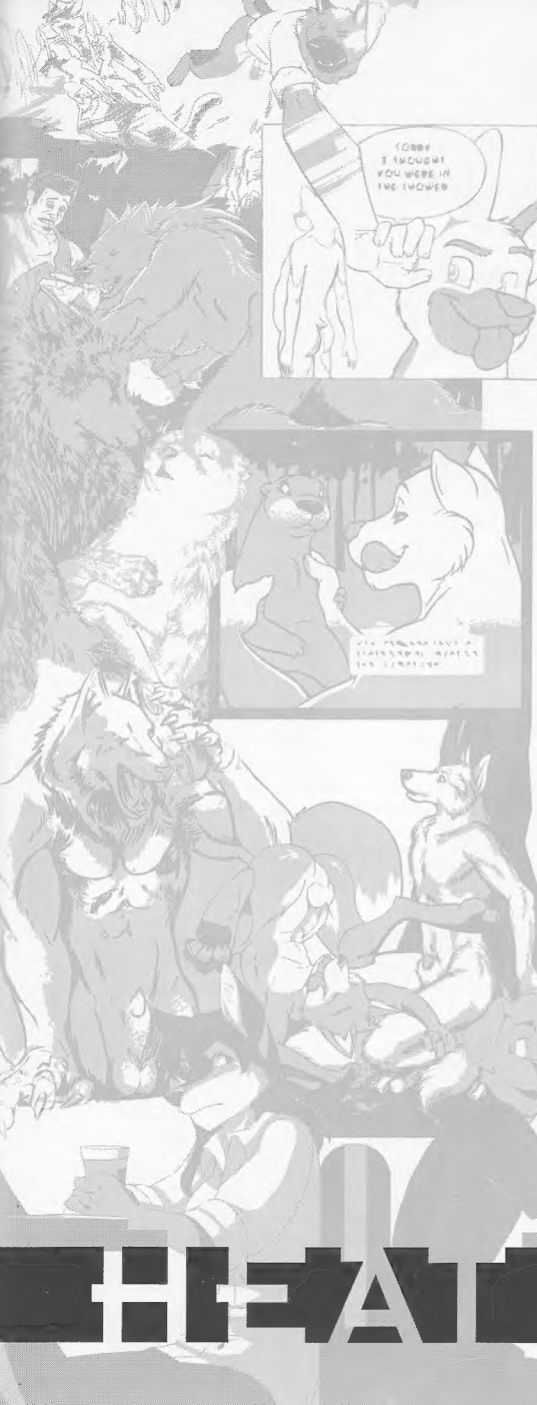




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SEVEN

By a Nose

STORY by Tony Greyfox

ART by Yuki





Jingles and beeps and the sounds of voices raised in exultation or irritation echoed up the jetway in a raucous Las Vegas greeting. It almost seemed a solid wall of noise to the planeload of travelers making their way towards gate D9 of McCarran International.

Rolf grinned to himself as he saw the ears of the cheetah walking next to him slick back hard against a rounded skull, nearly burying themselves in his travel partner's unruly shock of brown hair. "First visit to Vegas for you, Rusty?" he inquired, hitching his laptop bag up over a shoulder. They emerged into the crowded gate area and started to navigate their way through banks of slot machines and travelers leaving their last few dollars behind.

The cheetah nodded, rubbing at his ears. "Yeah...I thought Omaha was loud, but this is nuts. You seem okay with it, though."

"I've done this a few times, and my ears aren't quite as good as yours. You get—whoop!" He

reached over and snagged Rusty's sleeve, yanking the cheetah to one side just in time. Rusty blinked at the female yak charging through the crowd and bowling smaller people over, shouting about a connection in the B concourse.

"How the hell did you know she was coming?" Rusty demanded as he smoothed his jacket down and watched the wave of disruption fading in the distance.

Rolf grinned and tapped his nose. "Smelled the irritation and that awful perfume she was wearing getting closer. Kind of cut through everything else, y'know?"

"Your nose is seriously that good?"

"Yep." Rolf's brushy tail wagged as the crowds started to move in the right direction, following the overhead signs towards baggage claim. "Comes with being a German shepherd, you know? Believe me, I'd rather be as fast as you are. And as thin." He looked down at the beer gut that he'd been trying to get rid of for months.

"Are you kidding? I see you in the gym—you run more than I do. Give me a few days at the buffets, I won't be moving so fast," Rusty chuckled. "These conferences don't give me a lot of time to exercise, and, well...this is Vegas, y'know?"

Rolf laughed, following the cheetah onto an escalator. "Good point. Don't worry, you'll get bored of that pretty quickly."

"Oh, don't tell me you don't go out in the evenings and soak up the Strip." Rusty cast a skeptical look at the canine. "Nobody at home to worry about or anything like that...this is a vacation for you!"

"I've been here a few times, Rusty. Don't worry, I've got things to do at night." He grinned and pointed to a sign. "Carousel 8, looks like."

The two coworkers chatted about their conference plans and stayed out of the way as crowds of tourists and convention-goers milled around the baggage carousels, all set to the sounds of a news update program on the big screens. Rolf was nodding distractedly at Rusty's grumblings about the early morning and vaguely paying attention to a news item about the local drug trade when his nostrils flared. Cinnamon and a hint of cocoa. He grinned, only partly at the look on Rusty's face, as a pair of slim, tan arms slipped around his waist from behind and a warm body pressed against his back.

"Hello there, mister," a soft voice purred in his ear. "Welcome to Las Vegas."

"You folks have a hell of a chamber of commerce, if you're the welcoming committee." Rolf turned around, his tail wagging so hard that it nearly knocked over a passing ferret, then wrapped the cat in his arms. "Hello, Sara," he murmured, nuzzling at one of her pointed ears as the tan-and-brown feline melted into his embrace.

A slight "ahem" drew their attention, and both looked up at the bemused Rusty. "Uh...I assume this is a friend of yours, Rolf?"

The shepherd grinned and nodded, drawing the cat, a sleek figure in jeans and a dark sleeveless shirt, into the curve of his arm. "Rusty Brown, this is Sara Merino. She's a close friend..."

"I'd never have guessed," Rusty mumbled, taking her outstretched paw. "Nice to meet you... Now I see why you always volunteer for the Vegas trips, Rolf!"

Sara giggled and leaned against Rolf's side. "It's a selfless sacrifice..."

"I do my best for the good of the company," Rolf said piously. "Travel is such a difficulty, you know."

Sara stepped back and looked around them. "No bags yet?"

"Not yet...oh, there it is right there." Rolf leaned between two confused looking tourists and snagged his suitcase from the belt. "Great timing."

"Need a lift to your hotel?" Sara grinned impishly at the shepherd. "I charge less than the taxis around here."

"Sounds like a good deal. I'll see you tomorrow morning in the lobby, Rusty?"

The cheetah scratched his chin. "Uh, sure thing, Rolf." He watched the mismatched pair, a thirty-something canine and a slim mid-twenties feline, dance their way paw in paw through the crowd, and shook his head. "Gotta get here more often..."



Scents swirled up from the bed sheets—cinnamon, mocha, aloe, sweat and desire all mixing into an intoxicating blend that filled Rolf's sinuses. Sara was soft heat against him, her voice low and demanding as they moved together, fingers brushing through fur, bodies pressing and separating and meeting again.

The canine's chest pressed against her back as his hips moved insistently amid a chorus of bedsprings. A final push, and she yowled a soft cry of pleasure into the pillow as he tied with her; her body writhed against Rolf sinuously as his knot filled her. With a low growl against the side of her neck he stiffened and groaned and eventually slumped, panting, atop of her.

He carefully drew Sara onto her side, arms wrapped around her as, still linked, they slipped into the haze of afterglow, his nose pressed to her head fur, engulfed in her scents. "I've missed you," he murmured, kissing one pointed ear, which flicked in response. She drew a slim arm up and caressed his muzzle, turning to nuzzle at his chin.

"Glad you made it. And I'm very glad you aren't sharing a room...this might freak out your roomie." She giggled naughtily.

"Probably." He rested his cheek against hers and rumbled quietly. "You've been okay?"

Sara nodded, snuggling back into him. "Mm. Things are all right. The job market's still tight, but I'm managing. Family stuff's still annoying. You know how it is."

"Yeah, I know." Rolf rested one big paw on her flat stomach, fingers kneading gently. "Have...have you given any thought to what we talked..."

Mocha-furred fingers pressed against his lips and she turned her head to look at him as best she could. "Please don't, Rolf...You know I can't leave right now. My mama's still sick, my brothers are trying to keep everything together...and I need to stay with them."

Rolf kissed her fingers and nodded. "So you said before. But one day..."

"One day, maybe." She stroked his muzzle and smiled, a touch of sadness in her eyes, then settled back into his embrace. "For now, let's just enjoy the next few days."

"I always enjoy spending time with you, Sara." He nuzzled her between the ears, and she giggled. "Right now, we've got..." Rolf paused and wiggled his hips, earning a deep pleased purr from the feline.

"...about ten minutes where we don't have a choice."

An impish smile crossed the young cat's face. "Hmm. I got some ideas for that time..."

"I hope they're as good as mine," Rolf growled as he rolled onto his back, pulling her onto his chest.



"Nothing like a night of losing your hard-earned cash to clear the mind after a numbing day of accounting seminars," Rusty commented as he stepped up behind Rolf, the cheetah cutting through the crowd that bustled through the Lion's Den casino and finding a spot at the busy craps table.



"Who's losing?" the German shepherd snickered to his friend as he slid another heap of chips in. "I must've been good to the right people today or something."

"Been a busy boy, huh?" The cheetah leaned around his bigger canine cohort and lifted an eyebrow as Sara wiggled her fingers at him. "Oh, er, hi...Didn't see you there."

She grinned. "I'm sneaky that way. Having a..." The cat was drowned out as the crowd around the table groaned. Rolf rolled his eyes ruefully and picked out another pile of chips.

"Well, I was doing well...damn snake eyes."

Rusty patted his friend on the shoulder. "It's probably me. I think I'll go lose some more on the blackjack tables. Seeya later."

"And I'm going to the powder room," Sara said, leaning up to kiss the shepherd on the cheek, an action that drew several envious glances from around the table. "Be back in a few minutes."

The table stayed busy and active, but the dice were starting to go dead, and Rolf's chip stack was shrinking faster than he preferred. He caught the scents of several players around the table turning dull and sour, a sign that they were unimpressed as well; one after the other started to drift away as another roll turned up for the house, and the dog decided it was time to change games himself.

Rolf scooped his chips out of their bin and turned, searching the crowd. Sara hadn't been back yet, he realized, and it had been at least 15 minutes. Tilting his head up, he sniffed, lip curling a little at the mass of scents that assaulted him before his brain started to make sense of them and separate them out.

Old beer, angry sweat, the mediocre chicken fettuccine from the buffet...his nostrils flared, and there it was—cinnamon and cocoa. And a touch of...fear? His eyes snapped open and he started pushing his way through the crowd. The Lion's Den was a new property just off the Strip, and tourists had flocked to it as a novelty; he tried to avoid stepping on too many feet as he worked towards that scent, but still caught a few angry glares.

"Mister Schweitzer?"

Rolf's head snapped around at the voice, zeroing in on a brown-and-grey face that had appeared next to him. Feline arrogance oozed from the small tom, both in his scent and in the expensive suit he wore. He smiled slightly. "We need to talk, you and me."

"I'm sorry, I'm..."

"She'll be fine, Mister Schweitzer, but you need to come with me to make sure of that."

Long, white fangs flashed as Rolf's lip curled, and he took a step towards the cat, who barely moved. "Where is Sara?" he growled, a deep angry sound.

"Someplace safe. Smell. She's not in the casino any more. But she's with some of my people, and you need to come along with me right now." The feline cocked an ear forward. "Unless you want that to change."

Rolf forced himself to relax. "Are you telling me that you kidnapped a woman in the middle of a casino?" He almost laughed, but instead raised a paw and waved it at a large bulldog in a black suit and name tag, who started to make his way over. "You're an idiot. The security in here is..."

"Something the matter, sir?"

"Yes! This fool is..."

The bulldog lifted an eyebrow. "Excuse me." He turned to the cat. "Is there a problem, Mister J?"

Rolf blinked as the feline shook his head, with a Cheshire-like grin. "Not yet, Mikey. Stick around, though, you can open the door for me in a minute." The bulldog nodded and took a step back, but remained watchful.

"Now, you see how this is, Mister Schweitzer?" The cat tilted his head to one side slightly. "If you don't, let me make it easy: I'm big in this town. I practically run this place. And if you want to see Sara again, you're coming with me. Right. Now."

Stunned, Rolf could do nothing but nod and stumble through the crowd, accompanied by the occasional prod from the bulldog, to an employee-only door and into the dim corridors beyond.



A black limo sat in the loading dock of the casino, and Rolf found himself bundled into it by the bulldog. Three other cats waited inside, tabbies all; they looked at him impassively, though their smells registered as curious and, in one case, dubious and worried, as the other feline—Mister J—stepped in. He took a seat next to Rolf and smiled. A waft of the cat's scent tickled the shepherd's nose. Rolf tilted his head slightly, trying to fix that odd touch in his mind, but Mister J's voice pushed it away. "Now, let me explain how this is going to go, okay?"

Still shocked by the realization that both he and his lover were being kidnapped by gangsters, Rolf simply nodded, his fingers digging blunt claws into the upholstery as his tail tried to tuck itself between his legs.

"Good," the cat said, condescendingly. "We're looking for someone—someone that we really, really need to talk to. One of my employees, in fact. He did something I really don't like, and I wanna hear what he has to say for himself. You're gonna help us out with that."

"But," Rolf started, confused, "I'm an accountant...how do..."

"Shut up." Mister J reached out and tapped Rolf's nose, leaving a slight smudge of what the shepherd identified as soap—foaming soap, from a washroom dispenser, not more than ten minutes old—behind. "It's this that we need. Cam?"

One of the other cats slid over and pulled a plastic Ziploc bag out of a briefcase. Mister J took it, holding the bag up. "Our friend was wearing this. We know you can track by scent—I saw it inside. So you're gonna find this scent for us."

Rolf's ears flicked back. "But...I'd need to know at least where he was, and..."

"I said shut up. We're gonna drive around some spots we suspect he might be, and you're going to pick up his scent. You're gonna lead us to wherever he is. And then you can go, and we'll let Sara go at the same time. Got it?"

"If you hurt her, I'll..."

Mister J snorted. "You'll what? You're an accountant. You gonna calculate me to death? Look." He prodded Rolf in the chest. "I'm a businessman, not a thug. I wanna do business with you, not fight." A thumb hooked towards the other three cats. "They are thugs. Right, Cam?"

The tabby identified as Cam smirked and opened his coat, showing a holster. His scent suggested he would have no problem using it. Rolf dug a furrow in the seat with his clawtips and growled.

"Okay. I'll need an open window, I guess."

Mister J grinned and patted his shoulder. "See how easy this is when we get along?"



Las Vegas was a lot bigger than he had realized, Rolf saw as they drove to one of the areas where the mysterious cat was suspected to be. Not that he saw much of it; his muzzle was tilted up, the tip of his nose poking out the rolled-down window, sampling the scents as they cruised.

The shirt had smelled of coffee, tobacco, sweat and an odd but familiar sharply floral tang that he couldn't quite place—that added up to a distinct cocktail of smells that Rolf was certain he'd be able to pick out at a distance, with some concentration. And he was concentrating, pushed hard by his worry about Sara. He needed to—the city was a melange of scents.

Long years of extreme sensitivity had taught Rolf to block out some of the background scents—the noxious smell of vehicle fumes were a constant haze, but the shepherd's mind nudged them aside and let him focus more clearly. He took long, deep breaths, almost tasting the air as the limo traveled through quiet neighborhoods. Food scents tickled over his nostrils, reminding him that he hadn't eaten.

Freshly cut and watered grass laid a haze over the otherwise arid landscape.

He sorted through the smells carefully as they drifted past, eyes closed, then grunted as a paw thumped against his leg. He looked at the cat with a frown.

"Any luck yet, sport?" Mister J asked, tapping his extended claws on the leather upholstery. "We don't have unlimited gas in this thing, ya know."

"Look, if you want me to do this, you're going to have to let me do it my way. I was just getting into it when you distracted..." He stopped and his head snapped around to the window, his muzzle sticking out into the night air. A corner of his mouth tilted up in a slight grin.

"What? What?" Mister J and his crew leaned forward in anticipation. "You get something?"

Rolf held up a paw. "Stop the car. I think..."

"Stop the car!" Mister J waved at the others; Cam slapped the divider to the driver's compartment and hissed an order, and the limo eased to the curb in the midst of a residential area. The cats leaned forward as Rolf pressed his face to the door, breathing deep, his eyes closed.

The car door flying open caught his escort completely off guard, and Rolf was out of the car and at a full run before Mister J could shout a warning. The shepherd stretched out and vaulted over a fence at full speed, inwardly thanking his doctor for urging him to take up running as he raced across several back yards in short order, hearing the angry shouting trail off behind him.

Dodging across a road and through an empty lot, Rolf slowed to a trot along an alleyway, panting, big ears pricked to catch nearby sounds. Nothing. He turned his nose up, taking a long deep breath, and caught a whiff of an angry Mister J drifting in from well in the distance...going the wrong way, it smelled like. Rolf grinned, and turned his attention to the scent he had caught before. He broke into a trot again, following the scent of cinnamon and cocoa...



"Come on, come on—pass the ball! Yeah!"

The mackerel tabby slapped the coffee table with a grin as figures made their way back and forth on the TV screen. "About time the Rebels got some offense," he said to his companion on the other end of the sofa, who shrugged non-committally. "They've been awful this..."

Two sets of ears perked as the doorbell rang, and the tabby stood. "Must be the pizza. That was fast."

He walked to the door, digging his wallet out, and stretched up a little to peer through the peephole while unlocking the deadbolt. "What the...HEY!" he yowled as a dark figure reared up and slammed hard into the door, shattering the doorframe and driving the heavy wood directly into the feline's face.

Rolf stepped over the stunned cat, turned around and kicked him squarely in the nose, which made a satisfying "crunch" that made the big dog feel better. He turned, nostrils flaring, and locked his eyes on the figure that had jumped up from the sofa.

Sara's eyes were wide and surprised as he darted over to grab her arm. "Come on!" he growled urgently, pulling the slim cat towards the door. "We have to get away from here before he wakes up."

"Where...how did you..." Her voice was shrill with shock as Rolf dragged her past the unconscious guard.

"No time! Come on, we can wave a cab down over on Charleston and get back to the hotel."

"Rolf, where..."

"When we're in the cab, okay?" He motioned along the street towards the moving lights of the cars two blocks ahead, and drew the smaller feline along behind him, his nose tilted upwards to test the air around them warily.

A passing taxi stopped at the shepherd's wave, and he bundled a still-confused Sara in.

"Treasure Island," he told the driver, before leaning back and taking a deep breath.

"Rolf, how did you find me?" Sara asked quietly as she leaned over to him. "I..."

He tapped his nose and smiled a little. "Lucky breeze. Do you have a cell?" At her nod, he pointed to it. "Call the police and have them meet us at the hotel. If we stay in my room, we should be safe for now."

As the tan-furred feline dialed, Rolf leaned against the window. He listened to Sara hesitantly recite the details for his hotel room and watched the traffic pass by, feeling safe for the first time since he'd been dragged out of the Lion's Den.



The deadbolt slipped shut and Rolf turned away from the door with a relaxed sigh. "What a night," he breathed, walking to Sara, who had been quiet since making the call. He put his paws on her shoulders and looked down at her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm...fine, Rolf, really...just a bit confused, is all." She managed a smile, and slipped her arms around his waist, drawing her body close to his and nuzzling into his chest. "This has been a weird night."

"You're telling me." The canine held her warmly. "How long did the police say they'd be?"

"They weren't sure, I guess it's a busy night." She flashed him an impish smile. "Sounded like it'll be enough time, though."

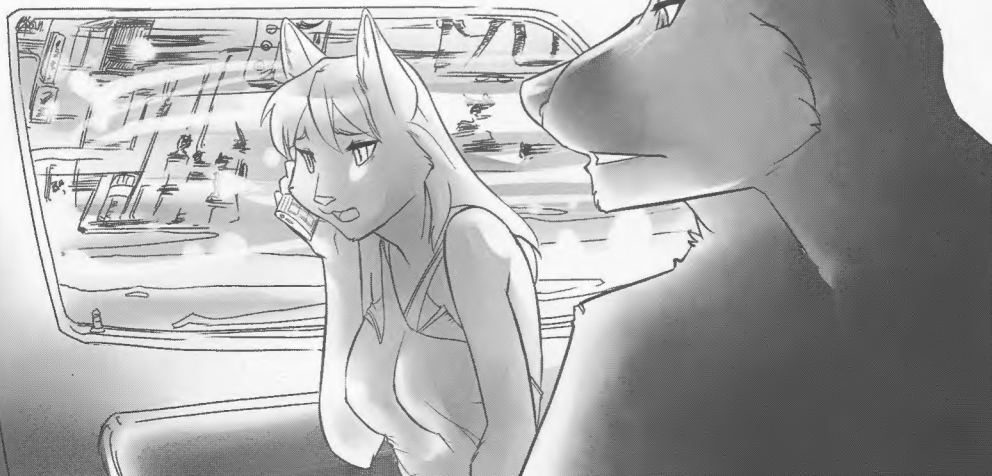
Rolf tilted his head curiously. "Enough time for whaaarooooh!" A sleek paw squeezed him in a sensitive spot, and he blinked. "You, uh...you sure—"

"Yes," Sara purred, her other paw joining the first to work on his slacks. "I have to reward my rescuer..."

"A thank you would—ooh! Suffice..."

Sara's talented paws cut him off, and Rolf gave up fighting. She nudged him over to the sofa, and he was lost in the feel of her caress, her breath tickling over him, the brush of her fur. He grinned at her smirk as she wound his discarded belt around his wrists and slipped it through the bare wood arm of the sofa, and groaned as her touch drifted from his neck down his now bare chest and lower.

Silken lips brushed over his sheath, warm wafting breath tickling around his growing arousal. Her petite fingers stroked through his thigh fur and up around his sheath as her whiskers brushed,





teasing,
along the
exposed flesh of
his shaft.

The dog moaned in pleasure as Sara's tongue, rough and hot, twirled around his tip, encouraging him to full arousal. "Oh, Sara," he murmured, wanting to stroke her soft fur as her lips closed around him and slipped slowly downward. Her eyes locked on his as she rocked on him, then slid off, her gaze going to the door for a moment.

"You know how I love to take my time," she whispered, her cheek resting against Rolf's erection, "but we'd better make this fast...just in case." Sara glanced to the door again, then giggled. "You can make it up to me later."

"You're in charge, lover." Rolf tugged at the belt encircling his wrists. "So whatever ohhhh that works..." He was cut off in perhaps the best way possible as Sara buried her muzzle in his bellyfur, engulfing him entirely, tongue swirling.

The canine lay back and groaned as he was pleased, Sara's talented paws working around the base of his sheath just how she knew he appreciated, and he felt the bulge at that spot beginning to grow.

"If you keep that up," he murmured, "you won't be able to fit me..."

Sara shook her head around his length and kept at what she was doing. Obviously, Rolf thought muzzily through the growing pleasure, she knew what she was doing, so he settled back and let things progress.



He was jolted out of his reverie when someone banged on the door. "Uh?"

Sara looked over her shoulder at the door "Oh," she said quietly, standing. "I'd better, uh...get that."

Rolf's eyes widened. "Sara? I'm naked and, uh...still tied up here." He gave his paws a yank, and winced as the belt tightened around them. "Won't look good..."

She self-consciously wiped her muzzle and looked over her shoulder at him. "I'm sorry, Rolf. I had to call him," she whispered, almost inaudible, before unbolting the door.

Mister J pushed past her angrily. "Goddamn hotel cops, I had to—" His eyes locked on the shocked canine on the sofa, and traveled quickly downward, widening before he turned away. "Oh, jeez...you couldn't have thrown a blanket over that? Well, I know why you're with him now."

"Julian, please..." Sara put her paw on the tom's shoulder. "He only wanted to..."

"I don't care what he wanted, we have to find that son of a bitch tonight or—"

"What in hell is going on?" Rolf demanded from the sofa as he tried frantically to get his paws loose of the belt. "Sara? What have you done?"



The slim tan cat looked at him again, sadness in her eyes. "I had to, Rolf. Mama's hospital bills are terrible and Julian nearly broke us buying into that stupid casino, we need—"

"Shut up, he doesn't need to know about family business." Mister J—Julian—grabbed her shoulder and shoved her roughly towards the door. "Go home, and stay there. I didn't want to do this the hard way, but, well..."

Sara turned at the door and held a paw out towards Rolf. "I didn't mean..."

The door shut on her, and Julian walked over to the trapped dog. He picked up Rolf's slacks and threw them over his groin with a shake of his head before reaching into a pocket and extracting what Rolf recognized as a taser.



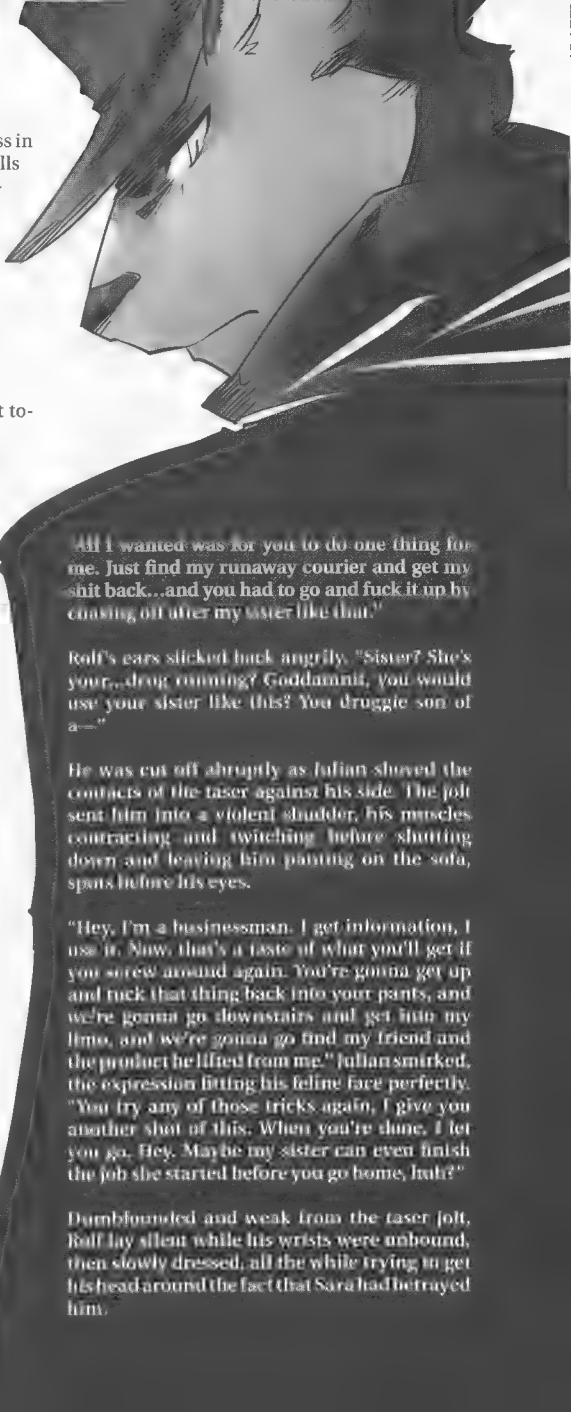
"All I wanted was for you to do one thing for me. Just find my runaway courier and get my shit back...and you had to go and fuck it up by coasting off after my sister like that."

Rolf's ears slicked back angrily. "Sister? She's your...drug running? Goddamnit, you would use your sister like this? You druggie son of a—"

He was cut off abruptly as Julian shoved the contacts of the taser against his side. The jolt sent him into a violent shudder, his muscles contracting and twitching before shutting down and leaving him panting on the sofa, spots before his eyes.

"Hey, I'm a businessman. I get information, I use it. Now, that's a taste of what you'll get if you screw around again. You're gonna get up and fuck that thing back into your pants, and we're gonna go downstairs and get him my limo, and we're gonna go find my friend and the product he lifted from me." Julian smirked, the expression fitting his feline face perfectly. "You try any of those tricks again, I give you another shot of this. When you're done, I let you go. Hey. Maybe my sister can even finish the job she started before you go home, huh?"

Dumbfounded and weak from the taser jolt, Rolf lay silent while his wrists were unbound, then slowly dressed, all the while trying to get his head around the fact that Sara had betrayed him.





This time, the crowd in the limo wasn't playing around. Julian shoved Rolf up against one of the side windows bodily, his taser close to paw. Across the way, the three toms that had accompanied them before sat eyeing the big dog, paws inside their coats. His escort was completed by a fourth feline who wore a heavy bandage on his nose and an angry scowl. Nondescript buildings slipped past in the darkness, but Rolf paid them no mind; his nose was poking out of the window again, and he had his eyes closed as he unconsciously sifted through the various scents that whipped past his nostrils. Half of the dog's mind, though, refused to let go of the last thing he saw as the hotel door had closed: the sad expression on Sara's face.

Julian nudged him in the ribs with the taser and smirked. "Hey, mind on the job, loverboy. Anything yet?"

"No." His reply was nearly a bark, angry and guttural, and all of the cats instinctively flinched back. "Leave me alone. I'll tell you if I smell him."

"You better, loverboy." Julian snickered and nudged the cat next to him. "I guess you got a chance with Sara now, Chuck."

Rolf growled angrily at the byplay, his ears slicked back and thick tail tucked tight against the seat as he tried to block them out and focus on the scents from outside.

Something tickled his senses, and his ears perked. "Turn right."

"What?" Julian looked out the window, then at Rolf, warily. "Why?"

"Because I think I'm getting a trace. And it's getting dimmer the longer we talk."

Julian nodded to the tabby at the front of the compartment, who leaned up to direct the driver. The limo followed the next right-hand turn, and slipped into a mass of industrial buildings. Immediately, the smells resolved in Rolf's mind—that odd floral scent, and a tinge of tobacco, of the same type as he had smelled

on the shirt the cats had pressed on him earlier. He motioned for the bag again, and one of them held it out; the shepherd waved his nose over the open top and then tested the outside air.

"Yeah, that's him. Close. Slow down."

The driver did as requested, and they cruised slowly between medium-sized warehouses, most of them shuttered, a few others with the occasional vehicle parked outside. That floral scent rose in Rolf's nose steadily, until finally he waved frantically for the car to stop.

"What?" Julian peered out the window. "Where is it?"

Rolf pointed at a low warehouse. "He's in there. I'm almost certain of it."

Julian eyed the dog for a long moment, then nodded. "Okay. Boys, let's go see Andy." He grabbed the back of Rolf's shirt and gave him a yank. "Come on, loverboy, you can point us in the right direction."

The shepherd growled as he was pushed out of the car. "Dammit, I'm not part of your thugs—I did what you wanted, now let me go!"

Julian nudged Rolf with the taser again. "And let you run off to the cops before we're done? I don't think so. Come on, hound dog. Sniff this guy out, we'll do some business, and then you can go."

"I don't believe you." Rolf showed teeth and pushed at the cat, who hissed at him. He heard the soft sizzle, and then found himself staring at the stars, his lungs cramping and his muscles uncramping as he gasped for breath.

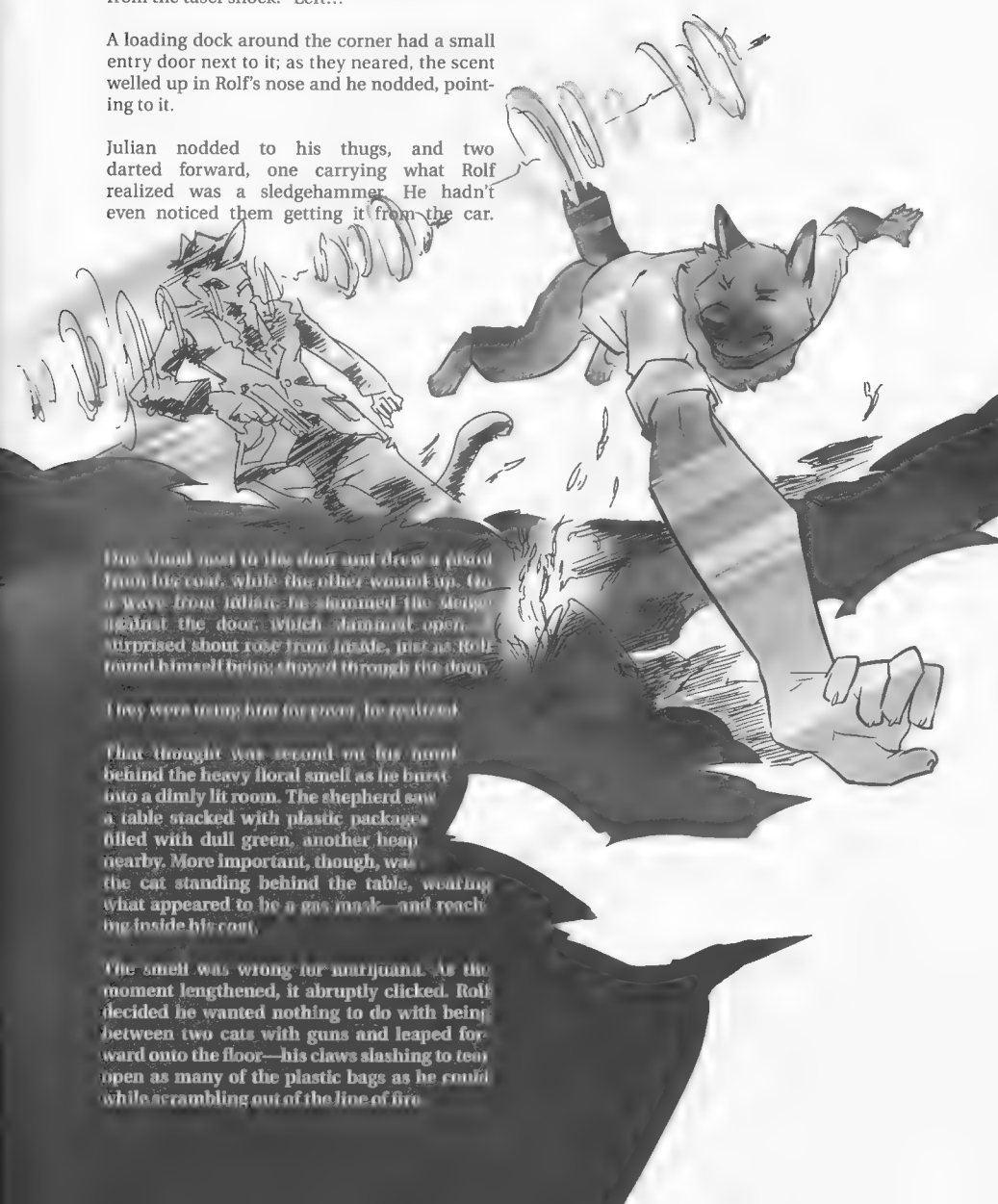
Julian loomed over him. "Do that again, and I'll fry your balls. Get him up," he directed the other toms, who hauled Rolf back to his feet and pushed him forward. "Get moving."

The big canine shook his head groggily and let himself be shoved towards the warehouse, his nose up. He shook his head at the front door as they approached.

"Not coming from here," he gasped, still winded from the taser shock. "Left..."

A loading dock around the corner had a small entry door next to it; as they neared, the scent welled up in Rolf's nose and he nodded, pointing to it.

Julian nodded to his thugs, and two darted forward, one carrying what Rolf realized was a sledgehammer. He hadn't even noticed them getting it from the car.



One stood next to the door and drew a pistol from his coat, while the other wound up, to a wave from Julian: he slammed the sledge against the door, which slammed open. Surprised shouts rose from inside, just as Rolf found himself being shoved through the door.

If they were using him for money, he realized,

that thought was second on his mind behind the heavy floral smell as he burst into a dimly lit room. The shepherd saw a table stacked with plastic packages filled with dull green, another heap nearby. More important, though, was the cat standing behind the table, wearing what appeared to be a gas mask—and reaching inside his coat.

The smell was wrong for marijuana. As the moment lengthened, it abruptly clicked. Rolf decided he wanted nothing to do with being between two cats with guns and leaped forward onto the floor—his claws slashing to tear open as many of the plastic bags as he could while scrambling out of the line of fire.

A blizzard of green leafy material followed the canine as he scrabbled out of the way. A shot rang out behind him, then another, but he didn't bother looking back until he had tucked himself next to a storage cabinet and could peer back around.

The table had been knocked over, and he saw the cat in the gas mask hidden behind it, looking bewildered. Julian and his crew had collapsed onto the floor, and a chorus of low purrs was rising from the toms as they rolled amidst the leaves that had scattered around them.

How, Rolf thought to himself as he watched, had he forgotten the smell of catnip?

He adjusted himself in his hiding place and pulled a small can of spray paint out of where it had been digging into his back. The motion caught the attention of the gas mask cat, who turned to stare at him.

"Don't...don't move!" a worried, muffled voice called.

With a surprisingly accurate throw, Rolf knocked the gas mask off his face. A few moments later, he was rolling around in a heap of catnip with the others.

Walking through the drifting flakes of vegetation, Rolf watched the cats play, and shook his head. He picked up a cell phone that had been dropped, tore open a few more bags of material, and walked out, dialing the police and closing the door behind himself.



"American Airlines announcing a gate change; flight 2219 to Omaha will now be departing from gate D2. Again, flight 2219 will be leaving from D2."

Rolf set down his beer and looked at the ticket sitting in front of him on the bar top. "Figures," he muttered, checking his watch. He still had two hours before his flight, and wondered how many more changes there would be.

It had been a busy few days, he reflected, staring into his glass. The police had collected the

stoned felines and scooped him up as well. Rolf had spent most of the night in the station until they had taken pity on him and sent him off, and he had spent most of the day asleep before a worried Rusty woke him up.

The rest of the conference had been a wash, between the adrenaline letdown and the interviews with the assistant District Attorney, who was thrilled to have a big drug case to be prosecuted. Two of Julian's thugs were talking, he had learned, and it looked like the whole pipeline would be going down. Julian—who he found out wasn't as big a guy as he thought, just a minor partner in the Lion's Den—was likely to be enjoying prison time for unlawful confinement and aggravated assault, which had made Rolf somewhat happier about life.

Not that he was terribly happy, the shepherd thought as he sipped his beer again.

His nostrils flared. Cinnamon and cocoa.

"Rolf?"

The canine stared into his beer, feeling the figure slip into the seat next to him. A soft tan paw settled onto his arm, and he sighed.

"I didn't have a choice, Rolf. My mother—" Sara recoiled a little as Rolf turned an angry glare at her.

"You didn't have a choice but to try and use me? How deep are you in your brother's little project, Sara? Are you running drugs too?"

"No, I—"

"But you knew what Julian was doing. And you turned me over to him." He spoke softly, but the disappointment was evident in his voice. "I thought..." He shook his head and looked away from the cat, her anguish evident in her eyes.

Sara leaned close, her paw still on his arm. "We had to, Rolf. My mother's bills, Julian's spending...it was the only—"

"You know I would have helped you!" Rolf pulled his arm away from the feline. "If you'd asked, I would have helped you anyway I could."

Money, insurance, whatever, but..." He sighed and finished his beer. "I have a plane to catch."

Sara reached for his paw and caught it, the corner of her eyes shining. "You didn't tell the police about me."

He looked at her, then back down. "No. I didn't."

She squeezed his fingers. "Thank you for that."

"I don't turn on friends." He extracted his fingers from her grasp and stood. "Think about that."

Rolf looked back, just once, as he passed through the door into security. Sara still sat, watching him. One paw rose in a tentative wave as the door closed. With a sigh, Rolf turned back to watch the line move ahead of him.

A familiar figure waved a spotted arm as he straightened from relacing his shoes. "Rolf! Hey, man, I was wondering if you'd make it today," Rusty exclaimed. "You doing okay?"

"Sure." The shepherd shrugged, shouldering his carry-on. "As okay as you might expect, what with missing most of the conference and spending all that time in police stations."

Rusty winced. "Yeah...sorry about that. You know, you never did tell me..."

"Later, Rusty, okay? When we're back?"

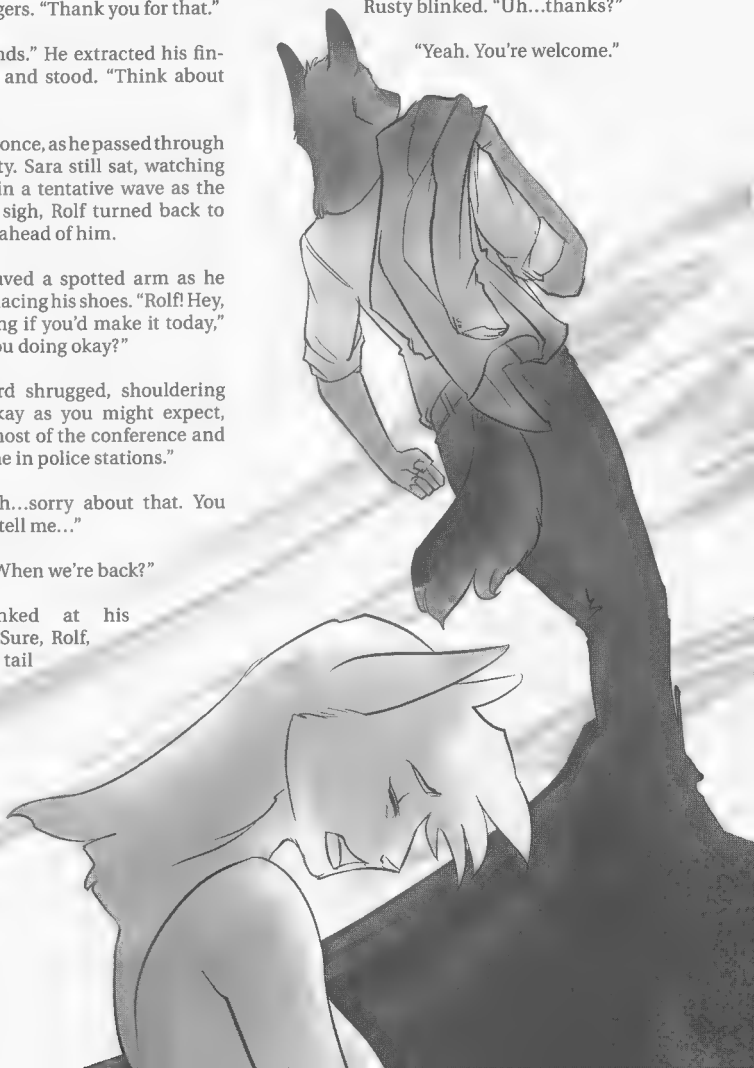
The cheetah blinked at his companion's tone. "Sure, Rolf, no problem." His tail swished, and he nudged the dog

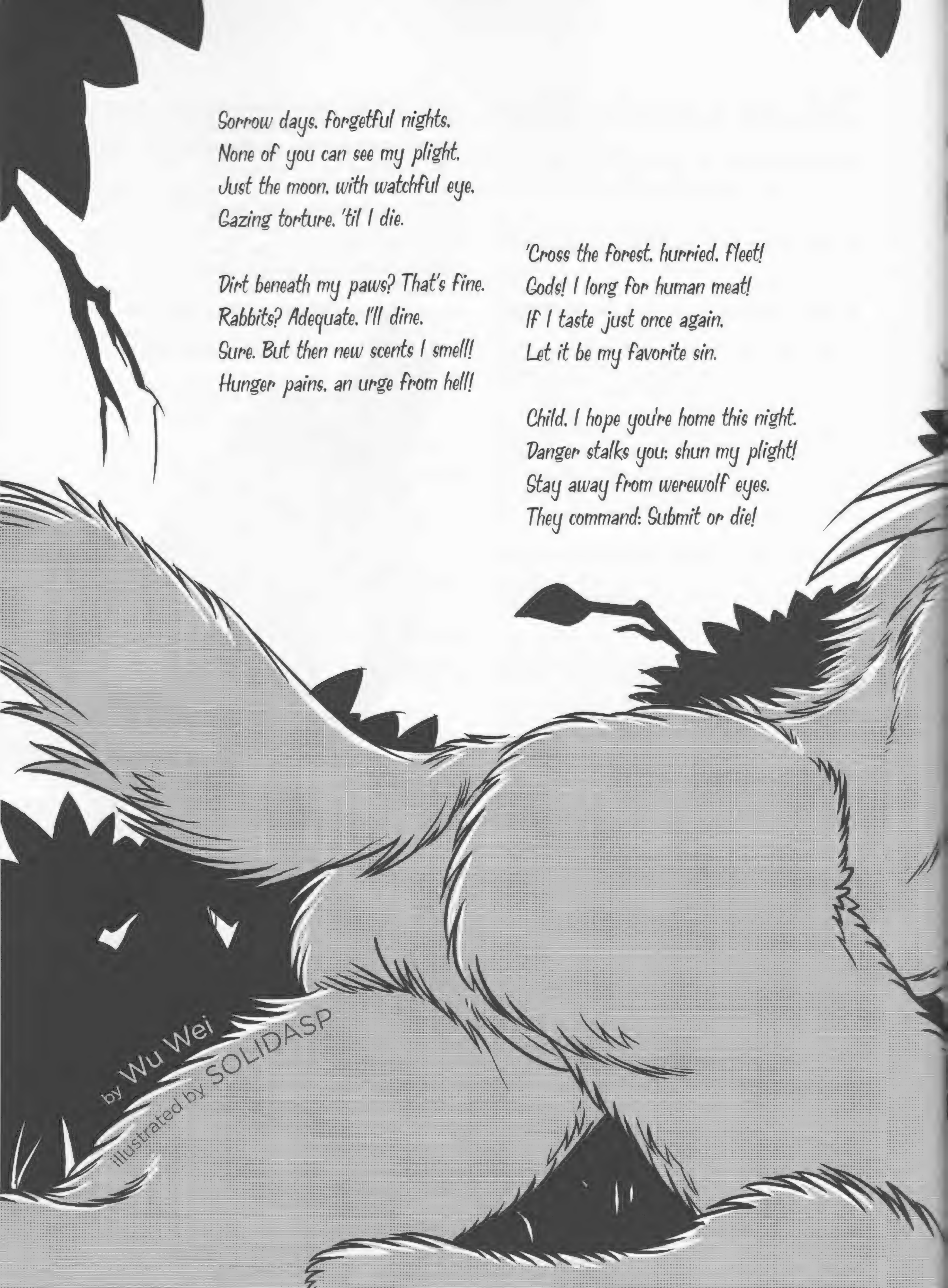
in the ribs lightly. "Too bad you were so busy... man, I had a blast! Saw the sights, caught a show, won some money. You were right, Rolf. This place is great!"

"That's good, Rusty." Rolf dropped heavily into an uncomfortably hard seat and managed a half-smile. "Tell you what. You can have the Vegas trips for a while. All of them."

Rusty blinked. "Uh...thanks?"

"Yeah. You're welcome."





Sorrow days, forgetful nights.
None of you can see my plight.
Just the moon, with watchful eye,
Gazing torture, 'til I die.

Dirt beneath my paws? That's fine.
Rabbits? Adequate, I'll dine.
Sure. But then new scents I smell!
Hunger pains, an urge from hell!

'Cross the forest, hurried, fleet!
Gods! I long for human meat!
If I taste just once again,
Let it be my favorite sin.

Child, I hope you're home this night.
Danger stalks you; shun my plight!
Stay away from werewolf eyes.
They command: Submit or die!

by Wu Wei

illustrated by SOLIDASP

A Werewolf's Last Warning



The Day I Met You

by Corgi



IT ALL STARTED THIS EVENING
WHEN I BROKE UP WITH MY
INSENSITIVE BOYFRIEND.
HE FELT THAT HE
WAS TOO "MACHO" TO
SHOW ME ANY AFFECTION.



AND THEN I RAN INTO HIM,
JUST LIKE IN "NOTTING HILL!"
HE ACCIDENTALLY SPILLED
HIS MILKSHAKE ALL OVER
MY SHIRT.



I THOUGHT THOSE THINGS
ONLY HAPPEN IN THE MOVIES!
SUDDENLY HE WAS APOLOGIZING
AND OFFERING ME CLEAN
CLOTHES AT HIS HOME...
HOW COULD I REJECT
SOMEONE SO...ATTRACTIVE?



SO HERE I AM...
WHAT COULD
POSSIBLY GO
WRONG? HE'S
ONLY TRYING
TO BE KIND.



HERE!
LET ME WASH
THIS,



OH MY...
THE MILKSHAKE HAS
GONE THROUGH YOUR
SHIRT AND STAINED
YOUR FUR.



YES...
DON'T...DON'T
WORRY
...



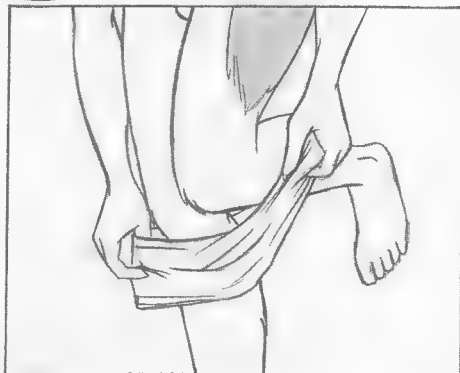
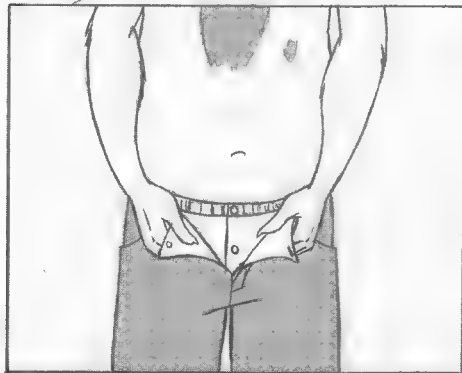
LET ME FIX IT...
YOU'RE WELCOME
TO USE MY
SHOWER.



IT'S THE LAST
DOOR DOWN THE
HALL, ON THE
LEFT.

A...
A SHOWER?!









...AND THEN I SAID
TO HIM: OK, BUT IF I
HAVEN'T RETURNED IN
FIVE MINUTES, CALL THE
FIRE DEPARTMENT!

HAHAHA!

OH DEAR,
HE'S NOT ONLY
HANDSOME, BUT
ALSO FUNNY AND
INTELLIGENT.

THANK YOU
VERY MUCH FOR DINNER.
IT WAS DELICIOUS...
YOU'VE BEEN VERY
KIND TO ME.

NO PROBLEM
AT ALL, FRIEND IT
HAS BEEN A
PLEASURE.

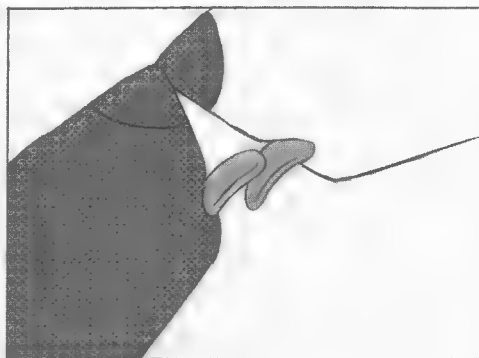
ERRR...
DO YOU MIND
IF I ASK YOU
SOMETHING?

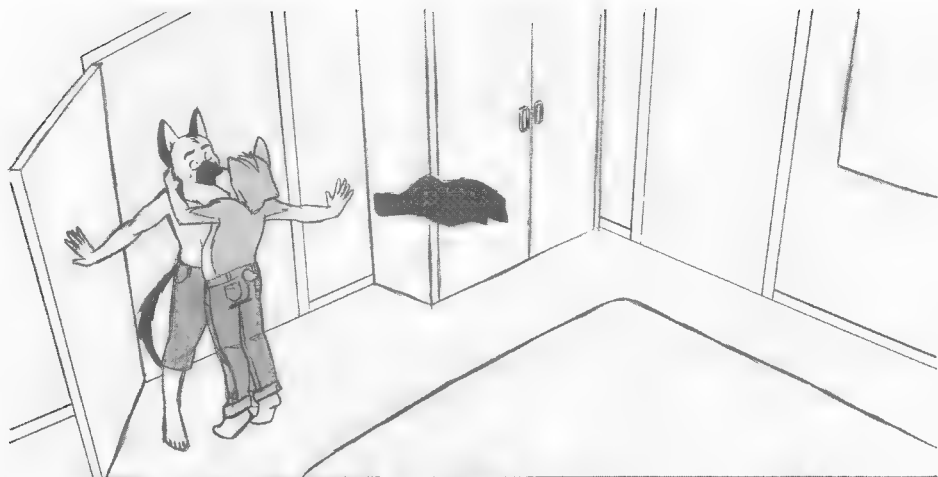
SOME...
THING?

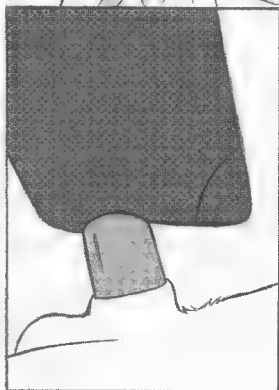
ERRR...
SURE, ASK
ME.

WHEN I
CRASHED INTO YOU,
YOU LOOKED...
DISTRACTED AND
SAD...

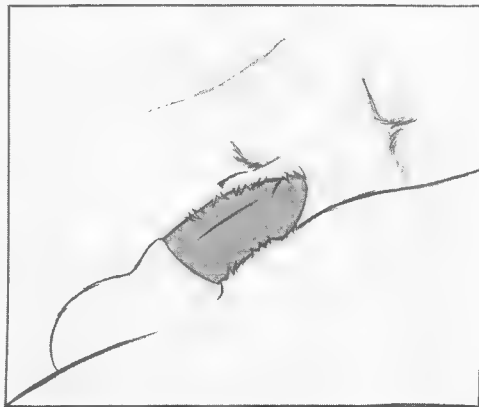
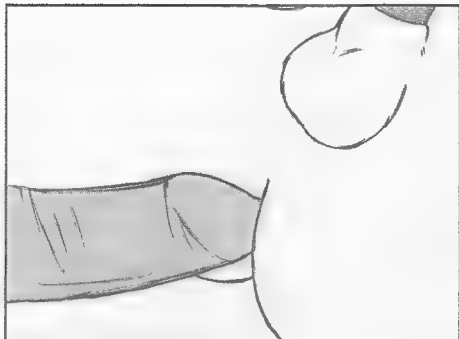
WERE YOU
WORRIED ABOUT
SOMETHING?

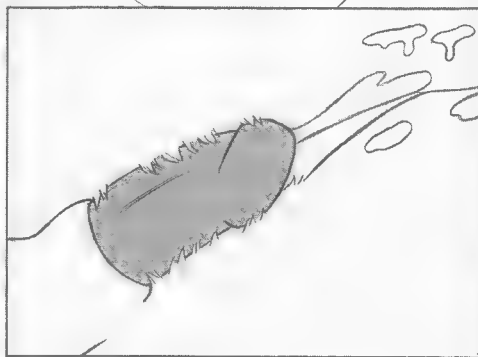
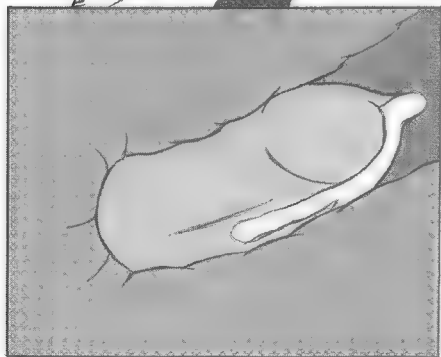














THAT WAS
FANTASTIC,
WASN'T IT?

OH YES!
REALLY
FANTASTIC!

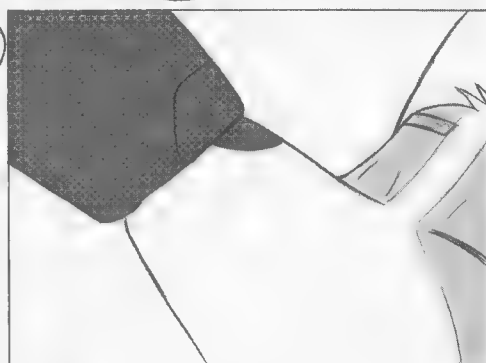


AND IT'S
ONLY THE START...
I HOPE YOU HAVE
ENERGY FOR
MORE!

HAHAHA!
THAT'S FOR
SURE!



I LOVE
YOU, MY LITTLE
DOGGIE...



AND THAT WAS
THE FIRST OF
MANY TIMES WE
MADE LOVE THAT
NIGHT...



BUT ALSO, THE FIRST
OF MANY WONDERFUL
NIGHTS AND DAYS...
SINCE THEN, HE HAS
TAKEN CARE TO MAKE
ME HAPPY EVERY DAY.



ONE NIGHT

It was the briefest window—
the slightest opportunity and the barest chance—
open for so short of a time.

Yet for that which awaited the lone wolf at the moon's zenith,
every effort to make that window was well worth it.

It was worth the run,
it was worth the exhaustion,
and it was well worth the risk.



by Faora Meridian
illustrated by Dark Natasha

Civren's bare footpaws beat heavily upon the earth as he ran, and the wind swirled around his body as he moved. Brilliant violet eyes focused on the forest ahead and around, on the remembered path that wound through twisted trees and deep night. A tattered brown loincloth—the only piece of clothing he wore—rippled in the wind as he bolted through the night. His fur was as black as the starry sky save for his back, where flecks of purple fur denoted him as something different, as more than a normal lupine. The fur and the eyes together formed the mark of the Khalir, the tribe of wolves banished from the kingdom of Renthani generations ago for their gifts and powers.

Nomads and travelers, the Khalir seldom remained in one place; the lupine tribes sought for themselves no single home after their banishment. Their travels kept them safe from those who would do them harm, but they were a terrible curse for the one wolf that sprinted desperately through the night. Civren fiercely hated the nature of his people—or rather, the stigma which had led to their exile—because it denied him so much. And yet he fought that denial and found his solace in a solitary journey, undertaken but once each year.

The path, so strong in his memories, faster than any other route, brought him to the edge of lands of powerful darkness, where evil powers would reach out to harm him. The threat they posed was far too great for Civren to risk bringing anyone but himself. Vicious predators also prowled the landscape, and their hunts always lasted through the night. And finally there was the Renthani kingdom that had banished his ancestors in the first place, whose borders lay so very, very close to his destination. If they found Civren, he would be lucky to receive a swift death. There was so much danger in his pilgrimage, so many forces that fought to stop him.

Yet Civren turned his eyes to the sky and smiled. The moon and the stars shone brightly down upon him, and they illuminated his path enough to guide him inexorably towards his destination. In spite of the clouds that rolled in from the east and in defiance of the darkness to the west, that divine light spurred him onwards. The wolf could feel himself drawn as he drew closer and closer, and the chill breeze in the air drove him on as it wrapped around him. Puffs of steam emerged from his nostrils as he

panted, but still he did not let up. He could not. The window was small; even for one as fast and familiar with the path as Civren, the journey to and from his destination left him with only hours in between. Every time he'd made the trip before, he'd only barely made it back to his tribesmates before they had moved on and left him behind.

Yet equally important for his present trip, he needed to run. Every moment lost was a moment never to be recovered, and every single moment was a precious one. Whereas his first trip had been considerably safer, the flow of time had seen the darkness spread. Its reach had grown to swallow up much more of the land. The predators, driven mad by the unholy shadows, had become more dangerous. The Renthani borders had become more heavily patrolled.

A bolt of lightning split the sky above, and arced through the clouds as he ran. The storm that rolled in only gave Civren greater strength, and the very wind itself bent around the lupine and pushed him onwards as it howled through the trees. His destination was close then, so very close, and Civren would not be stopped, even by the elements.

The plains ended at the banks of a great river. That river marked the boundaries of the Renthani lands, and most of the Renthani believed that the Requara lurked in the lands beyond, out by the distant sea. If the Renthani ever knew the truth, Civren was certain that they would take immediate action to remove the Requara from their homes and banish them anew. It was perhaps fortunate that the Renthani never knew how close the Requara remained, how they watched over those who had once been kin to both Requara and Khalir.

The river curled up and towards the northwest. Along the banks Civren ran, and his footpaws left deep imprints in the sand. Thunder boomed above the wolf, and the sound spurred him on as he sprinted towards the end of his journey. Finally it came into view; the mouth of a small cave set into the banks of the river. It was so easy to miss, and yet it led to the one thing in the world worth all the risk and trouble.

He stood there; he had waited for Civren as the wolf paused at the mouth of the cave. Civren knew exactly where the cave led, since he'd made his way down that rocky passage once, years before. On that day, he had conveyed a single Renthani otter male down through the

dark, and into the brilliant city the Requara had constructed beneath the earth. And there that same young otter stood, years later, as he awaited Civren's arrival.

Suddenly the two crossed to each other, and the wolf wrapped his arms tightly around the otter. The young male pressed back just as eagerly into Civren as the wolf squeezed him tightly, and their two bodies all but melted together in their embrace. Civren's eyes closed as he laid his head on the white-robed otter's shoulder, while a sigh of relief escaped his muzzle. He'd made it. There was even more than that, though; he'd made it before the moon had even reached its peak.

Civren revelled in the warmth of his reunion with the young otter male, even as he remembered how different things were the first time they had met...

It had truly started seven years earlier. A fourteen-year-old Civren and his father had made the journey together, when the elder Khalir had decided his son was old and strong enough to make the journey to the border of the Renthani kingdom. He'd wished to show Civren the great structures constructed by the Renthani. That was not what they had found.

The towers and homes of the Renthani town were alight with flame, and demonic figures stalked within them. Blood ran like a river through the middle of the settlement. For a brief moment, Civren's father had thought to fight the shadowy invaders. He'd seen the truth of things, though; the demonic creatures had already won. There was little that could be done.

The two lupines had turned away from the town and begun their return home when Civren had found him. A single otter youth, a male no older than Civren himself was slumped against the base of a blooded tree. His eyes were closed and his body shook, but he still clung to life. There had been no doubt in Civren's mind. The Khalir sense of duty and honour was clear, and he had gathered the cut, broken and beaten otter into his arms. Yet, rather than take the wounded youth back to the Khalir, Civren's father had told his son to follow him east. He told Civren of the Requara, and of their powerful healing magic.

While the Khalir had become nomads, the Requara had become reclusive. They'd hidden themselves in their underground city, away from both the Renthani and the darkness, and few Khalir had ever even looked upon their people. Fewer still had ever seen the Requara city, the great subterranean construction of crystal and ice that stretched out beneath the river.



When Civren and his father reached the Requara, two otters were standing guard just inside the cavern. They looked just like the injured

Renthani otter Civren had rescued but for their fur; their eartips and the underside of their tails all bore a soft azure tone. As the violet eyes and purple backfur marked the Khalir as different from Renthani wolves, so too did the Requara's strange colouration differentiate them from the Renthani. Their bodies were unclothed, but from their heads to their toes their fur and flesh



were patterned and crossed with brands and tattoos, runes and arcane symbols.

While the sentries had stopped Civren and his father before they could enter, it had taken but a single look upon the broken body in Civren's arms for them to understand. The otter Civren had carried might not have been Requara, but he was in desperate need of healing and care and the Requara people would not, and indeed could not turn him away. One sentry had remained on duty, and the other had turned and guided the Khalir father and son down into the caverns.

Though Civren never saw the city after that time, the one glimpse he'd had of it had been burned into his mind and memory for eternity. Great spires of crystal that shined in the torchlight stretched up to the roof of a massive cavern. Waterfalls trickling down from the river above had been frozen into various shapes, sculptures and buildings. For the Requara—each a

powerful and skilled hydromancer—the ice itself became a tool for construction. Never had Civren seen anything like it in his life, and the young wolf had been certain that he never would see anything like it again.

A group of healers had awaited them near the entrance of the city. Civren had surrendered the otter in his arms to the care of the Requara around him, and turned his head as his father called him over. As he approached, the older Khalir had told Civren that the Requara would take care of the young male that he'd saved, and that there was nothing more that they could do. He suggested that he and Civren return to their own tribe, that they leave the otter in the Requara's capable paws.

Civren could not. It was more than just a sense of responsibility for the life he had saved. Though logically he knew that the Requara would look after the otter, that meant nothing. So his father bade him stay, since Civren could

catch up before the tribe moved on if he left before the sun rose the next morning. Civren's father told him how the Khalir always tended their fallen, and that he would learn of this as he watched over the young being he'd saved. He returned to the tribe to report on what had happened, after he offered his thanks to the Requara.

For the better part of the afternoon and evening, Civren remained at the young male's side. The Requara bathed him, dressed him in clean robes, and rejuvenated him with their magic. Before Civren's eyes he watched the Requara healers place their hands on the otter's body, and the he saw wounded male's body regenerate itself. Bones realigned themselves and became strong once more; cuts to his flesh sealed and his charred fur grew anew. The young otter had been weakened, brought to the point of death by the brutal attack on his town, and yet the powerful abilities of the Requara were able to return him to health.

Of course the otter was terrified when he woke up. The last thing he'd remembered, before he'd passed out from his wounds, was the demonic soldiers storming through his town. He had no memory of the pair of lupines that had spirited him away from the ruins of his home to seek out help. That he'd woken up from the attack at all was a miracle to him, though his fear magnified at the sight of the Requara and Civren. The demons were bad enough for the otter, without his being surrounded by exiles.

Renthani lore told terrible stories of the Requara and the Khalir. More than a few aligned those banished tribes with the same forces of darkness that had destroyed everything the young otter had ever known. Certainly the branded and tattooed bodies of the Requara set the revived male into a fresh panic. He had calmed slowly as the Requara healers explained what had happened to him, and what magic they had used to restore his life. They told him that he was in no danger within their city, and safe from the demons thanks to the efforts of Civren and his father.

That was when Civren and the otter had first focused on one another. The wolf smiled tentatively and lifted one hand, extended towards the otter. Their eyes met, and the otter's expression softened lightly as he took Civren's paw in a gentle grip. He thanked Civren for what he had done, his tone cautious. When the otter had asked him what he wanted in exchange,

the Khalir had simply shaken his head. He'd looked down and over the male he'd saved and smiled, and said that he was just happy that he was alive and well. The otter had smiled back, the expression considerably more warm.

It wasn't love at first sight; such a thing was impossible for two people in their positions. One was raised to hate the banished tribes, and then had been rescued by one only to be taken to the city of another. The other was a nomad, taught to avoid the Renthani lands lest he be slain by an old prejudice. But as they released each other's paws, a bond and common trust was forged. Just as the otter found he felt safe, Civren found himself for the first time drawn towards someone. It was as if something beyond the physical had pulled him towards that one being, that one individual. At the time, Civren had put it down to the rescue and his desire to help.

The two had sat down and talked all through the night. The immediate topics revolved around the young otter's town and what had happened there. Understandably he was devastated; he told Civren of his parents and his brothers and sister, how they had all been in the town when it had been attacked. He told of the demonic conquerors, and how his father had fought them off to his last breath. He told of the way they had beaten him, and turned the brutality into cruel sport. Civren had held the otter as he cried, and the wolf had comforted and consoled him through the anguish that rocked his body and heart.

Eventually, one of the Requara had informed Civren of the time. The wolf had not wanted to leave; he had felt no greater desire in his life than to stay at the otter's side, to ensure that the young male was going to be okay. He had no choice though; if he did not return to the other Khalir before they left, he would never be allowed to return to the tribe. Still he toyed with the idea, and he watched the otter even as the otter watched him. Despite those eyes, those deep, inviting, almost pleading green eyes, Civren had known what he had to do.

He prepared to leave, to make his way back to the Khalir. The entire time he told the otter about his people, about how they were and how he was welcome to return with him, if he felt up to the travel, but the young male was simply too weak to make the trek. Unable to bear the thought of slowing Civren down, he had told the wolf to go on without him.

However, faced with no home to go back to, no surviving family and no life left, the otter had no idea what to do. He'd been cautious at first, but hopeful, when the Requara healer that had restored the otter to life offered to allow him to stay within the frozen city. He had been told that he would be cared for by the Requara and that he would not be bound to follow Requara traditions as long as he was respectful of them. That he could stay as long as he liked, and that Civren could visit any time he was able, or even stay if he was also so inclined. That he would have a home.

Before he left, Civren had shared one final embrace with the otter and promised that he would return, if his tribe allowed him to. Even if only for a day, even if only for one night, Civren promised the otter that he would return in a year, as soon as the Khalir migrations brought him close enough again. Sudden realization dawned on him in that moment, the moment just before he left, that he didn't even know the young male's name. The otter had simply laughed, the sound rich and warm and intoxicating as he replied...

"Lian," the wolf breathed, his face all but buried in the otter's neck as he held him tightly. "By the gods, it has been far too long since I have last seen you." Civren squeezed him tightly one last time as his tail began to twitch and wag, before the wolf drew himself back and let his paws drift down to the otter's sides. "Look at you... you appear to be doing quite well for yourself."

Lian smiled widely as he stared into the slightly taller wolf's eyes. "And you as well, Civren," he replied, his voice soft yet melodious. "You seem to grow stronger with each passing season. You made the journey faster than ever before this year!" As Lian spoke, one webbed paw drifted slowly up and down over one of Civren's arms to trace gently over the muscles hidden beneath that dark fur.

Civren blushed softly beneath his fur as his arms relaxed under the otter's warm touch. "What can I possibly say, Lian? Each year I have but one evening with you." The wolf let his eyes drift off in Lian's green orbs for a moment, and he felt himself grow more at peace at the sight of them. "So indulge a tired wolf with a story," invited Civren. He hooked his arm in Lian's as the two walked out of the cave and down along the banks of the river. "Tell me what has transpired here, since last I saw you."

With a chuckle, Lian leaned against Civren's side as they walked. "Little of any real note, I am sorry to say," he answered with a smile. "Master Healer T'kasi has taken me on as his personal assistant, as of last spring. My duties are few since I have no magic, but I keep busy enough." Lightly the otter wriggled his fingers over Civren's belly, the touch enough to cause the lupine to giggle quietly. "Mostly, I count off the days until you return to see me."

Both wolf and otter laughed at those words as the two leaned in closer against each other. Their bond was unspoken, yet it grew with each visit of Civren to the Requara city. He and Lian had only grown closer and closer with each small spark of time they had together, and Civren knew well that Lian was not the only one who spent his time thinking of the other. "Have you...found anyone?" the Khalir asked tentatively. He glanced down at the otter as Lian laid his head upon his shoulder.

"No," Lian replied softly. The otter shook his head and turned the motion into a gentle nuzzle against Civren's shoulder. "You keep asking me this, Civren. The Requara...they are not so accepting of such relationships. As are the Khalir, as you know." The otter chuckled as he looked up at Civren's eyes, where the wolf met his gaze warmly. "A shame we could not have been born to different bodies. Perhaps then I might have a nice male all to myself, and you more consistently in my life at the same time."

Civren blushed softly at the suggestion as he lifted his eyes forward once again. Lian had told him how he felt on his third visit, that his feelings came from males instead of females and how he felt closer and closer to Civren with each visit. The wolf had never shown any tendencies towards either gender amongst his own people; none of them had ever felt right to him. Something about Lian though felt exactly like what Civren lacked from the others of his own people; Lian felt right.

The otter closed his eyes again as he tilted his head up into the cool night air. Life conspired against the two of them. How could they possibly be together, with so much distance? With how little time they had to share between each other? Lian knew he wanted Civren, and just as obviously the wolf wanted the otter, too. Despite his best efforts though, Lian had been unable to find a solution to their problem.

"A shame indeed," the Khalir sighed, and he hung his head slightly before he leaned it down

against Lian's. Carefully, he hid his smile from the otter's gaze. It wasn't the first time they had spoken of such things together, of the potential for the two young males to take one another as mates. Even as Civren felt Lian press against his side, the wolf thought back only three years, to his journey then...

That year, winter had come early. Ice had spread across the ground along Civren's path, sleet had assailed his vision, and fog had hidden the distant horizon beneath its veil when the wind did not howl and blow it about. It had also been a year of expansion for the darkness; the shadows had spread further still, and they threatened Civren's path to the Requara and Lian.

He had not been too fussed by the increased difficulty of the journey, though perhaps the younger wolf should have been. While no predators had struck at him as he ran, the soldiers of shadow themselves lashed out at him. Armed with the magical gifts of Goddess Vergai Herself, Civren had been able to beat them back. It cost him, however, in time and energy.

It was also both the first time and the last time that Civren would stop and wonder why he made the journey. The strength of the Khalir was legendary, and yet the Khalir avoided the Renthani and the darkness. They made no attempts to breach those lands; indeed, they skirted them wherever possible. And so the wolf, as he'd stood at the crossroads that led to the Requara, paused.

Lian had been a broken youth, and Civren had saved him. It had been pity that had drawn Civren to return the first time to the Requara, to check up on the otter. He'd had no obligation,



no duty to return again and again, and yet he had. Certainly he had enjoyed spending time with Lian; the two were natural companions, and once together were nigh inseparable. Perhaps the nomadic life of the Khalir was a lot of work in comparison to the moments of levity that he shared with Lian, but Civren had much to enjoy with the Khalir. The Khalir had fun on the days they did not travel, so why did he feel so drawn back to the Requara, and Lian?

Civren had closed his eyes, and thought back to their time together. The wolf and otter would speak of each other, and share their deepest secrets and greatest fears. They would cry and console one another when darkness reigned over life. A standout memory was when Lian had taught him Bel'charat, a Requara

game played on a wide, wooden board where certain pieces moved about in an attempt to contain others. It later became a staple of Civren's visits, and the otter was always quick to congratulate him on a rare win.

Lian was always playful and charming whenever Civren was around, and the wolf had later learned from Lian's master that he was not always so jovial. T'kasi had told Civren that Lian's mood always lifted around the wolf, and that he only wished Lian could always feel that way. The wolf had blushed brightly and hidden himself from the healer's eyes. Such flattery had been unfounded; after all, he only kept the otter company one night each year. It didn't help that the limits of their contact only bred a desire for more in Civren. He wanted more time with Lian. Something about the otter had even teased him with the prospect of life alongside Lian, with the Requara.

The wolf had leaned back against one of the trees near the crossroads as he'd thought of Lian. The otter was just...good, he'd decided. Nothing the Khalir did brought Civren such joy

and pleasure as his time with Lian did. They played and they talked—they had even spent long hours snuggled silently together under the stars, far from prying Requara eyes—and so they had of course grown close. The wolf had looked up into the starry sky that night, as he'd felt a shiver that was colder than the frosty air around him. How close, he'd wondered, had they grown?

Surely they could not have grown that close, the wolf had decided. All the fun they had shared could have been shared with anyone else. Civren had paused though, when he thought about that. No one else showed him the care and affection Lian did. And much like Civren, Lian rarely had anyone with which to share those experiences as well. Civren started to understand it as the stars twinkled back down upon him.

They were two lonely souls in the world, brought together but once a year to enjoy the company of a kindred spirit. No one else was so pleased to see them; no one else was so thrilled to simply be in their presence. Perhaps that was what had planted the seeds of their feelings for one another. Civren had jerked as he'd reached the realization that he had feelings for Lian. He cared about the otter deeply...deeply enough to make such a dangerous trek whenever he could. As he'd broken into a run once more, he had wondered just how deep those feelings flowed.

The Khalir had been very tired when he had finally arrived at the mouth of the Requara cave. Lian stood there to meet him, as he had since after Civren's first visit. Together the two young males had walked off along the shores of the river, as Lian led Civren to a healing spring he knew of nearby.

While tired, Civren spoke with Lian all through the night. Even as the wolf lay across a surprisingly comfortable patch of grass, Lian lay beside him and snuggled up into the Khalir's warm side. His arm around the otter, Civren had stroked his back and chuckled. "This is nice," he'd said.

Lian had rumbled a quiet murr as he nodded, and nuzzled up against Civren's chest. "Truly it is," he replied as his eyes slowly opened to glance up at Civren's face. "It is a shame indeed that neither of us have this, but for each other."

With a nod Civren had agreed, and he'd slipped his hand up to scratch lightly at the back of the otter's neck. "Are you not concerned

that Healer T'kasi or Healer Velvet will come out here?" he asked. His eyes had flickered briefly back the way they had come to look for any sign of a Requara healer who might seek the spring's waters. "They may not be quite so pleased to see this display."

With a snort and a shake of his head, Lian had laid his head back down upon Civren's chest. "Let them see," he replied with a quiet sigh. "You have friends amongst the Khalir, Civren. You have family. Here, I am...accepted. I am nurtured, and I have a place. It is not home."

Despite himself, a quiet whimper had slipped free from Civren's muzzle as Lian spoke. The otter's speech was so soft and mournful that Civren had to struggle to contain tears. "Truly, I am sorry to hear it," he had quietly apologized, though the words had sounded inadequate even to his own ears. "Please, Lian... what might I do to help you?"

At those words however, Lian had brightened. "You are, Civren," he'd replied with a soft smile. "You help me here, with everything you do for me." A blush tinged the otter's cheeks as he glanced away. "You come all this way just to see me. The first time you did it, it was to make sure I was okay. You keep coming back to me. No one here truly sees me as anything more than the Renthani survivor. But you...you make me feel special." As he'd spoken, the otter's tone had become warmer and lighter. The words had come with the ease that they do when spoken with true heart.

Civren had blushed brightly as the otter spoke, and he nodded and closed his eyes. "I... just want to see you," he'd said softly. "How could I resist the opportunity, if I could have but a few fleeting moments with you? I truly enjoy your company, Lian. Your mind is as bright as your heart, and I never enjoy anything with my kin as I do with you." The words were truer than any others Civren could have said.

"And my body keeps you returning with greater eagerness each year," Lian had continued jokingly with a smirk, as he'd leaned up to flick his tongue out across Civren's chin.

The Khalir had lowered his head though, to reply quickly to Lian's words. Instead any reply had been silenced as his lips met Lian's, and the two males accidentally came together to share their first kiss. Both the wolf's and otter's eyes had flashed open wide as they felt the contact of the other, but at the same time neither could

pull away. They simply remained together, each with their arms tight around the other and their lips locked.

It was Lian who finally broke away from the kiss; the otter pulled back slowly as his cheeks burned hot beneath his fur. "Civren," he'd murmured quietly as his eyes all but refused to meet the Khalir's, "You...were there for me, that day. And long after your duty to me ended, you have kept returning. My life is the better for your place in it, and my heart all but sings for you..." He trailed off slowly, and the otter glanced up at Civren almost pleadingly as his lips twitched and moved, even as no more sound emerged.

Civren leaned down with one shaky paw and stroked gently over the otter's cheek. "I feel for you, Lian," he replied quietly, and his eyes flicked away again briefly as if afraid someone besides the otter in his arms had heard the admission. "Since I saw you, since I saw you returned to health...and especially since I grew to know the person that you are. Every journey I make to you is to learn more about you. To know more of you is simply to..."

The Khalir's eyes widened and he'd cut himself off, aware of what exactly he had been about to say. Beneath him, Lian's blush had grown ever brighter and it showed plainly through his fur. "Could you?" the otter had asked as his voice trembled. "Could you love me, Civren? I cannot return to Renthani, a place where our love would be accepted...not with a Khalir on my arm. I cannot travel with you and the Khalir, and they would not abide us together. The Requara might not truly accept us as a mated couple, though they would offer us shelter and a home." His eyes met Civren's and held the lupine's gaze. "With only a life here, with only me...could you be happy?"

Civren had broken from Lian's gaze with a sigh, and he had hung his head to touch his forehead against Lian's. "I am not like the other Khalir," he said slowly as he reached to take one of Lian's paws in his. "I do not enjoy the life of travel. I do not seek an endless road to walk along for the rest of my days. To settle down once I had found a mate was something that I always wanted to do," he'd explained, "but no Khalir, male or female, would do such a thing."

However, the wolf's shoulders had slumped as he'd shaken his head. "...I could be happy, Lian, with you. I could love you. I might even now, but I am bound to my tribe for years to come. No Khalir before the age of testing is

given free choice to act, within the tribe or without." He gently rubbed his nose against Lian's. "My father's consent is what brings me here each year. My father would never simply allow me to leave the tribe, though. No Khalir would. Especially for a Renthani male."

"And the sins of the past are revived once more," Lian mumbled quietly. "The Renthani banished the Khalir, Civren. They banished the Requara and the other Chosen tribes as well. I am of the Renthani, but I am not the Renthani people." He smiled slightly, if only for a moment. "If the Requara can welcome me, surely they would welcome you, as well."

With a quiet sigh of his own, Civren had fallen silent and carefully considered Lian's words. The two lay together quietly for many minutes, and they had simply enjoyed the warmth of each other's bodies as the stars drifted overhead. The wolf sank into thought as Lian snuggled against him. Perhaps, he supposed, they would take them in. Perhaps they would, even if he and Lian were together. While both the Requara and the Khalir renounced such relationships, perhaps the Requara could be made to accept their union. Perhaps. Maybe.

The love had been stated, and there was nothing more to add; their bond simply continued to grow. It was a love; the seed of their meeting had breached the soil and had started to strain towards the sky. But for it to bloom there would have to be a way for it to be realized, a way for the two to remain together. Civren knew his duties to the Khalir couldn't allow that, even if he decided that it was what he wanted.

And so their love continued to remain unrealized, and the yearly visit of one friend to another had continued on for years more...

For a long time neither Civren nor Lian spoke; they simply held each other as they walked beneath the moon. The rest of the sky was blanketed by the dark stormclouds rolling in, the stars submerged beneath a sea of grey. Struck by sudden inspiration, Civren squeezed Lian tighter and grinned. He pulled away from the otter briefly and, before Lian could protest, Civren grasped him tightly by the paw and drew him along.

The wolf lead Lian up from the banks of the river and back into the trees along the edge of the banks. Civren ignored Lian's protests and queries and revelled in the otter's confused

laughter and chuckles as he pulled him along in his wake and through the trees. Together they giggled as the moon shone down over them, and thunder boomed in the distance before they finally broke past the trees and into the plains that lay beyond.

Immediately a gust of wind kicked up around them to ripple their fur and the otter's robes. With a yip Liam felt himself bowled over, and the force of the otter's pull yanked Civren down alongside him. They erupted in laughter as they rolled against each other atop the soft grass, and both the wolf and the otter wrapped each other up in their arms as they held on to one another tightly.

Civren rolled up and atop Liam with a grin and his paws grasped tightly at the otter's wrists as he chuckled down at him. Both males paused as the position sunk in, and blushes spread across both of their cheeks as they glanced down over each other's bodies. They'd felt that familiar pull before, the desire for their bodies to merge as one, but never before had either allowed it to happen. With the distance and their lack of time, it was fair on neither of them to indulge in the pleasure of one another's bodies with their situation so tenuous.

In that moment though, with Liam's face framed by the ripples of the grass beneath, Civren felt the logic of their decision melt away. He could see the otter beneath him struggle similarly with the promises they had made one another, before Civren took the struggle completely away in the simplest way he could. For the first deliberate time in their lives, their lips met in a kiss.

Their bodies rose up against each other as all pretence was dropped, all restraint shed. They moved together, one's arms wrapped tightly around the body of the other in the desperate cling of lovers trapped in a moment and enslaved to the march of time. Every second that passed drew the two of them closer and closer to the time of parting, to the point where they would be ripped from each other's arms once more by fate. Still, that desperation only fuelled their passion, and both wolf and otter started to surrender finally to the feelings that burned bright and hot in their hearts.

Lightning flashed overhead as thunder boomed once again. Civren drew himself reluctantly back from Lian's lips and began to softly pant. The otter's eyes were closed as Civren blushed and glanced down sharply. Restraint

and fear returned once more. "I apologize," he blurted quickly. The wolf looked everywhere but at the otter as the wind tousled their fur, as his ears flattened back against his head. "I...I should not have."

"Civren." Lian's voice was soft yet commanding, and the sound of it lifted the wolf's eyes to stare directly into the otter's. "Could I not have stopped you if I did not want it?" he asked as he softly smiled. He leaned in again to touch his forehead against Civren's. "You know what I want...as I know what you want. But we both know that this cannot truly be, you and I. You travel forever with the Khalir, and I...I must remain here. Your people would not welcome me..."

Civren knew well the truth of those words. Upon his return the first time and after he'd spoken again with his father, Civren had learned that the Khalir would never allow a Renthani to travel alongside them. That Lian was Renthani was enough, but that he was no warrior only solidified their laws. It had hurt, and had continued to hurt before Civren's latest journey. "No," he admitted sadly, "they would not. But tonight...there is no reason for us not to." The lupine smiled and reached up as he cupped Lian's cheek.

As he leaned into the wolf's paw, Lian closed his eyes again and sighed. "All the reasons we have previously spoken of still remain, Civren," the otter gently protested. "I know what decision you had to make. You continue to visit, Civren. I know you cannot leave the Khalir, and I accept this. These were your rules, the rules made because of your people. I abide by them, Civren." The otter's words began to waver as his head dipped low.

The wolf leaned back as he gently tipped Lian's muzzle upwards with one finger. Once more their eyes met, brilliant violet against bright green in the dark as Civren smiled softly. "I implore you, Lian..." The lupine paused to trace his fingers over the otter's cheek as his eyes searched the emerald orbs before him. "Please, tell me...do you trust me? With your life...with your heart...with your body, even?"

As Lian held the wolf's gaze, he nodded quickly and without hesitation. His body was warm as he pressed it up against Civren's and snuggled into the Khalir. "Of course I trust you, Civren," Lian replied softly, and he held the wolf's gaze evenly as he smiled. "With my life, with my heart...and of course, with my body as

well. I love you, Civren. You know this."

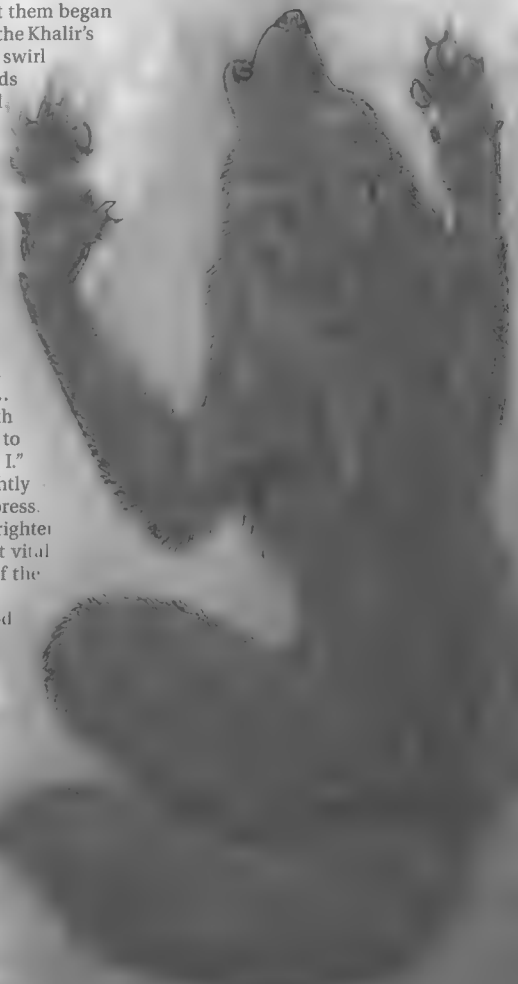
Civren's smile only grew wider and warmer as he reached up with one hand. His fingertips seemed to shimmer as he lifted them towards the sky, and he extended his mind even as he extended his paw. "As I love you, Lian," he replied softly as he gazed up into the sky, as words he'd practiced for almost a year came to his muzzle. "And in love, my otter...all things are possible. One needs only to see his path clearly to know what must be done...and with you, love has illuminated my path this night."

As Lian looked up the wind about them began to die, to fade slowly to nothing under the Khalir's will. Far above the clouds began to swirl about, battered and pulled by the winds as they dispersed, driven back and away and far and wide. The moon began to shine on the two young bodies as they lay in the grass, and a night full of stars watched down over them. While the Renthani were gifted hydromancers, the Khalir were the masters of the air.

As he lowered his paw again, Civren looked back into Lian's eyes as he held the otter tightly. "And on this night," he whispered, the sound so loud in the silence after the wind died down, "If you want to...I mean... Lian, I wish to take this chance with you. Just now, this one night...I wish to share myself with you, and you with I." The wolf stammered and blushed brightly as he lost the words he wished to express. A rush of shame tinted his cheeks brighter as he failed to express himself at that vital point after his rehearsed eloquence of the moments before.

Yet, as always, Lian understood. The otter smiled warmly and pressed himself as tightly as he could against Civren, and his arms slowly encircled the wolf's waist as he held him tightly. "My Civren," he murmured back, and the otter smiled warmly as he touched his nose against the wolf's. "Oh, my Civren...when you put it like that, how could I possibly refuse you? You need no such words with me. Of course I will...to-night, we will be together."

Civren's ears perked up as he heard Lian's words, and he could scarcely contain his excitement. The wolf abandoned all attempts to do so as he pressed forward, and he pressed his lips once more up against the otter's. Civren's eyes closed as he leaned into the kiss deeply, and his whole body shook as he held the otter—his otter—tight.





still air,
"I mean...
what do you..."

Lian pressed himself back against Civren, and his body trembled against the wolf as he felt a surge of passion run through him. With that final surrender to their mutual wants and desires, Lian felt a huge pressure lift from his shoulders. Seven years of want and loneliness and suppressed need spilled out all at once. His lips parted as Civren leaned deeper into the kiss, and he moaned softly against the Khalir as their tongues met.

As Lian leaned back, the otter squeezed Civren tightly against himself. He sprawled down onto his back and pulled the wolf along with him. Not once did their kiss break; their tongues danced uninterrupted as their bodies lay one atop the other. Their paws roamed over each other—Lian stroked down along the wolf's sides while Civren caressed the otter's cheek—and their breaths came in short, sharp pants through their noses. Each breath only fuelled the fires of their need; the scent of the other and of them mingled together sent both Lian and Civren's minds into a pleasurable haze.

When finally their lips parted, Civren immediately leaned down to touch his forehead against Lian's once more. His eyes opened slowly and met Lian's gaze as he blushed brightly. "So..." he breathed, his voice but a whisper in the

Civren's blush grew brighter still as he trailed off, and the Khalir glanced down as he felt the touch of a webbed paw feather over his hip and under his loincloth.

"So..." Lian echoed with a coy grin. The otter took charge of the situation as Civren once again fumbled with his words, and he revelled for a moment in the wolf's awkwardness. Deep down the otter found nothing in the world more adorable as when Civren tried to express how he felt; to watch the big, strong wolf stammer and blush was almost too adorable for him to bear. But as his paw started to stroke over the lupine's thickening sheath and he pulled off that inhibiting loincloth, he knew there was much, much more that he wanted than a simple blush. "So, if we are to do this...I wish it to be a night truly to remember."

Civren groaned as Lian's paw coaxed the tip of his shaft free of his sheath, and his musky length emerged into the chill air under the otter's efforts. "B-but...I do not...I mean, I know not what to do," Civren admitted. His voice sounded worried even as sparks of pleasure sent tingles through his body. He groaned quietly and his legs spread out slightly as the tip of his malehood nudged against Lian's thigh.

With a warm chuckle, Lian pressed up against Civren's chest gently. He rolled the

wolf down onto his back and slipped smoothly between his legs, and he smiled down into the lupine's face. "You will let me take care of you," the otter replied with a cheeky wink, as he leaned down and touched his nose to the base of Civren's sheath. He inhaled deeply and purred at the strong scent of his lover's musk, before he flicked his tongue out to lick along it warmly.

As that warm, wet tongue trailed up along his length, Civren felt a shudder run through his entire body. Even as every last inch of his shaft firmed under Lian's tender lapping, the wolf couldn't help but worry some; little self-conscious doubts nipped and prodded at him. But then, as Lian planted a soft kiss upon the tip of the wolf's tapered malehood, those fears and worries melted away anew. A deep, low moan escaped Civren's muzzle as he felt the otter beneath him start to work his way down, and he felt Lian's lips part as inch after inch of the wolf's flesh sank into his muzzle.

Lian flicked his eyes up just in time to catch Civren looking down at him. The canid's shaft pulsed hard as the rest of his body relaxed and he drank in the sight of the otter at work. Lian smiled wide around his filled mouth, and he murred quietly as he pushed himself down the rest of the way. His tongue worked along the underside of Civren's length, and he finally closed his eyes as he savoured the wolf's taste. The otter's lips pressed tightly around the base of the wolf's shaft for a moment before he slid up, and he slowly began to work himself back and forth.

Every twitch and gasp Civren made under his efforts drove Lian's own desires. The otter's length started to rub up against the cloth of his robe as it started to peek up out of his sheath. He moaned as he worked himself along the first half of the wolf's shaft and wrapped his fingers around its base to squeeze gently as he worked. Lian detected Civren's musk grow stronger beneath his nose with every moment, and when he could take no more the otter released the base of the lupine member and pushed himself all the way down along it.

Civren's back arched as electric pleasure raced up his spine, his mind alight with the sensation of his malehood wrapped up completely in Lian's mouth. The wolf moaned long and deep in pleasure even as the otter between his legs breathed in his intoxicating scent, and one of his paws reached down to cup Lian's

cheek gently. His head lolled back as his eyes closed, and Civren's whole body shook as his hips twitched up against Lian's swallowing muzzle.

When finally he had to breathe, the otter drew back up to the wolf's tip. His tongue trailed out along behind his lips as his breath panted out through his nostrils. Lian's eyes gazed up at Civren, and watched as the wolf trembled. As he reached his free paw down within his robes to tightly wrap around his own length, the otter slowly pushed himself right to the base of Civren's malehood once again. His tongue curled along and around it, and he lapped over every last inch, savouring every moment he could taste his lover. He revelled in the act he'd wanted more than almost anything else for so long.

Yet the one thing he wanted more would approach swiftly, if the otter had his way. As he pressed his lips tightly down around Civren's length, Lian lapped at the trapped malehood again and again. His fingers squeezed at the wolf's hip as the otter worked at getting him slick enough for his true desire. When finally he was satisfied that every last inch, from forming knot to tapered tip were all soaked in a mixture of his saliva and Civren's pre, Lian backed up and carefully off the wolf's lap.

The moan Civren had been midway through making faded off into pleasurable pants as he opened his eyes and glanced down at the otter. "Wh...why did you stop?" he asked, completely innocent of Lian's intentions. His eyes traced over the otter's body as the other male chose not to respond; instead Civren watched as Lian slipped his robes up over his head and off his body. His eyes immediately drifted down to the otter's endowment; it was smaller than his own and it lacked the knot, but still very appealing to the wolf. Hormonal need ran through his veins as he looked questioningly back up at Lian's face.

Lian smiled as he tossed his robes off to the side and crawled forwards towards Civren. The wolf leaned back as he approached, and Lian planted his paws on either side of Civren's hips while he leaned up. The otter's lips touched gently once again to Civren's and the wolf's arms wrapped around his waist even as he crawled higher up against his lover's body. Lian's tail lifted slowly as he pressed his chest against the wolf's, and their hearts beat against one

another as he finally felt that slickened lupine tip nestled up against his backside.

That sensation was more than enough answer for Civren's unspoken query. His paws squeezed the otter against him, his grip tight as if fearful Lian would try to escape. The wolf's hips twitched upwards again and he ground his shaft up between the rump cheeks of the disrobed otter. Civren's groan broke their kiss and his body shivered. He pumped his hips back and forth experimentally, and the wolf revelled in the feel of the otter's body pressing back down against his sensitive flesh.

Murring quietly, while more of Civren's pre slid down over that thick lupine length, Lian lifted himself up slowly above it and reached back with one paw. He wrapped his fingers tightly around the wolf's slick shaft as he eased himself back down, and he guided the tip up to press firmly against the tight ring of his tailhole. Almost immediately he felt a warm trickle of fresh pre drool from his wolf's tip, and the otter took a moment to wriggle against that tapered head before he started to push himself down upon it.

The otter relaxed as he slid himself smoothly but quickly down, and inch after pleasurable inch of Civren's malehood pushed up inside him. While he'd never been taken by another, due to the Requara's traditions regarding such relationships, Lian had practiced with himself and some small objects before. It always became much more vigorous just before Civren visited, but on that one night the preparation was completely worth it. Doubly so when, locked in the throes of pleasure, Civren grasped him tightly and pulled him hard downwards.

Both wolf and otter gasped as all but that lupine knot surged up into Lian's snug, tight passage. Their arms clutched at each other tightly, each ran their fingers through the other's fur as pure bliss thrummed through their bodies, the pleasure of taking and being taken only emphasized by the emotions that burned in their hearts for one another. Civren's malehood throbbed hard against Lian's inner walls as the otter squeezed down around him, and both of their bodies shook as they held each other close.

It took little time, though, before the need to move took them. Lian was the first to shift, and the otter lifted himself up slowly and let his squeezing muscles drag against that deliciously thick length as a spurt of his pre soaked into the

wolf's chest fur. The otter arched his back as he pushed himself back down again. He gorged himself on as much of the Khalir's shaft as he could take, while his rudder tail thrashed and twitched against Civren's thighs.

As he shifted his grip to Lian's hips, Civren held the otter tightly and guided him up and down. The two settled quickly into a rhythm, with all of Civren's doubts and trepidation blasted away as the feeling of those warm, tightly-squeezing inner walls worked over his sensitive malehood. All the wolf was left with was his love for the otter before him, and the mounting need to complete their act of love.

Lian, though, kept his movements nice and slow, and the otter savoured every moment the wolf spent within him as he tried to draw it out as long as possible. His body shook as he squeezed down again, and his hips rolled to push Civren's shaft against his prostate. Back and forth Lian ground, and he panted heavily as his own length pulsed over the lupine's chest and rubbed through that soft, black fur. His body grew warmer in the cool night, and the otter's motions grew steadily more vigorous as his own needs intensified.

As the moon approached the peak of its travel across the starry sky above, so too did the otter and Khalir that shared their bodies beneath it. Civren reached up with one paw and cupped Lian's cheek once more as he started to buck his hips up against the otter's backside. His knot bumped up against Lian's rump more and more firmly as Civren nosed into the otter's cheek. Together they moaned, and Lian's fingers dug into the wolf's back as Civren pushed up harder.

A long gasp suffused the otter's moan as that thick knot pressed harder still against his entrance. Lian didn't know for sure that he could take it, but as pleasure pulsed through his nerves he knew that they could not end their night without it buried inside him. With a drive born of deep, intimate need, Lian started to pump himself up and down Civren's length harder and faster, and his bucks forced the wolf's shaft as deep into his body as it could go. One paw grasped at the lupine's shoulder for balance as he gave himself over completely to lustful need, and Lian let his body guide itself along his wolf's malehood as it wanted.

Civren only helped; his hips pushed himself up from the ground to eagerly thrust himself into his otter. Every buck of his hips became a

blur of pleasure as his malehood was wrapped up in sensations he'd never even dreamed of, as he shared them with the otter before him. Tightly he clutched Lian's hip, as the Khalir's shaft pulsed harder and hotter within the confines of his lover's body and pre soaked the otter's inner walls.

Lian kept his grip on Civren's shoulder even as he desperately reached down between his own legs, knees bent as he knelt over his wolf's body and worked himself back and forth. A shaky paw wrapped around his shaft, and it almost erupted just at that simple touch as Civren's shaft ground itself against his prostate once again. Lian moaned and panted as he started to rapidly paw at himself, and he leaned forward as his forehead touched Civren's.

He was going to lose his control; Lian knew it was only a matter of time. For every second he felt his lover ram that fat knot against his tailhole, the otter knew he was being driven towards his explosive finish. For as much as he wanted to continue, he knew all he had to do was get that knot into his body. Harder and harder he pushed down against that girth, and the tight ring of his tailhole started to stretch slowly wider and wider in an effort to accommodate Civren's size.

Finally, Civren himself could take it no longer. As he dropped his paw from Lian's cheek and shifted both paws to the otter's hips, Civren all but lifted his lover from his shaft. Only a third of his malehood remained within Lian's tight confines as the otter gasped and writhed in his paws. Quickly though Civren drew Lian back down again, and pushed the otter down hard onto his shaft. The quavering male in his lap slipped easily back over most of his length and, while there was a moment of resistance, the force of the pull and Lian's insistence popped Civren's knot up and into the otter's tight passage.

As they locked together, both Lian and Civren cried out and roared in pleasure. Lian's body trembled and shook as he squeezed down tightly around the Khalir's length, and his muscles spasmed around the lupine's embedded knot. His malehood erupted and spurted long ropes of thick, white seed deep into the wolf's chest fur. Each moment rocketed another and another shot hard out of the otter's length, and his fluids ran down and over Civren's body as he emptied himself over his lover.

With his knot squeezed so tightly and his whole malehood trapped deep inside Lian's body, Civren too reached his peak. As the first spurt of Lian's fluids soaked into his fur, so too did Civren's tip explode. Jet after jet of hot seed soaked into Lian's most intimate depths. Civren's shaft pulsed hard as he marked the deepest reaches of the otter's body as his own, and claimed Lian in the most intimate possible way. Every drop of his essence was as trapped as his shaft within Lian's body; his knot kept it all within the otter. Even if he lacked the benefit of that part of his lupine anatomy, Lian milked him tightly enough that not even a drop could possibly have escaped the squeezes of those muscles.

As quickly as the rush of pleasure that drove the young lovers to their peak crested and broke over them, the tide of bliss rolled back once again to leave them soaked in their afterglow. As they panted and moaned and murred softly against one another, Civren's arms slipped around Lian's waist and drew him tight against his soaked chest. The otter gave no resistance, and he laid his head down on Civren's shoulder as they breathed deeply of the scents of their act. The air all around was filled with their musk, the scent of males in the midst of passion.

The wolf tilted his eyes up to the clear, starry sky as he smiled. Lian didn't know yet; he and the otter had become physically intimate well before Civren had been able to tell him. Even as the heat of his afterglow and his otter kept him warm, the young wolf watched the moon continue its quest across the night. As it moved on, Civren knew that his own journey was complete, and that Lian would know when the morning came...

"And you are certain this is what you want?" Civren's father had asked him as dawn broke the previous morning. The elder wolf's black fur had greyed in the years since he had first taken his son to see a Renthani town, but his violet eyes and fur were still as vibrant as ever. "You know that the Khalir will never stop travelling, and even I cannot understand your desire."

Civren had merely smiled back and nodded at his father as the two embraced. "I am certain," he replied quietly, and a note of excitement had tinged his tone despite his efforts to contain it. "I understand that the tribes will not wait for me, and I understand that you cannot

understand. Father...I love him. I will no longer be apart from him for a year, waiting for one night to walk beside and talk with him. I cannot wait any longer, and the choice is mine now that I have proven myself before the tribe."

As he drew back from the embrace, Civren's father had folded his arms and stared down at his son firmly. "The path you choose is not a Khalir's life," he'd reminded the younger wolf. "To love another male is one thing...but what will you do? How will you and he make your living? The Requara are not like us, Civren. Their way of life is not something that you know. They support one another, as we do, but they might not accept your...mateship."

Civren's smile softened as he simply and firmly shook his head. "The Requara accept Lian, father," he'd answered smoothly. "They know of his feelings, and they know of mine. They have always continued to offer him a place with them, and they offer me the same, with him. Father, they offer us a home together. A life together." He had rolled his shoulders in an easy shrug. "We will make our way with them, as a part of their city. My command of magic is as strong as my sword arm, and they have expressed a desire to take me on as a guardian of their city. Lian already works as assistant to the master healers of the city, and if the day ever comes when their hospitality is worn thin by our love then I am a fine hunter. Lian has grown skilled in many areas; I watch him grow ever more capable each year." Civren's smile had grown as he spoke. "The Renthani do not follow the River Let'nori to the sea, and the land along it is fertile. Between my hunting and the farming techniques Lian knows, we could make a home for ourselves wherever we please."

The young Khalir had reached up and placed a paw on his father's shoulder. "I have passed the age of testing, father. I am my own male now, able to determine my own fate. I will forever be your son, but this path of the Khalir is not a life I wish for myself. It continues to keep Lian and I apart. Ours may be a hard life, yes...but it would be harder to go another day without him beside me. There is nothing in this world, be it blessed or cursed by the gods, that can keep me from him, now."

The elder wolf raised a single eyebrow. "Not even me?" he asked quietly, and his eyes had met his son's unwaveringly. "You are your own male now, and I cannot command you.

If I asked you to stay—if I did not demand or order—would you?"

"No," was Civren's quiet reply, spoken as he held his father's gaze just as evenly. "No, I would not. Father, I cannot stay. Lian and I have lost too much time already. I love him...and he loves me as well. Without the delays of the years rolling past, how much sooner could he and I have been together? No...father, I must leave."

The older wolf slowly nodded as he held his son, and his lips had pursed as he drew back once again. "You disgrace our line with your choice, Civren. You fly in the face of all our traditions and laws. I suppose then that there is only one last thing to be said to you." His eyes locked on Civren's. The younger wolf looked nervous and worried as he awaited his father's words, but the elder Khalir had smiled softly. "May Veragi bless you with a swift journey, son, and know that I love you."

The words had brought tears to Civren's eyes as he'd held his father, perhaps for the final time. He'd headed off soon after, to follow a familiar path towards the most important of people, the one that he needed the most. He had headed off into the breaking day, and he'd run through darkness and hostile land for just one night; one night that would mark the beginning of the rest of his life. A night and a life, both finally spent at his love's side.

You disgrace our line with your choice, Curen.

You fly in the face of all our traditions and laws.

I suppose then that there is only one last thing to be said to you...

May Uerugi bless you with a swift journey, son,
and know that I love you.



COWBOY

BRIEFS

RIDE 'EM HARD



THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

PICK UP YOUR FEET! ANY SLOWER AND YOU'LL BE OUT OF BREEDING AGE BY THE TIME WE GET THERE...

I'M SORRY! I DIDN'T KNOW IT WAS SO FAR TO YOUR VILLAGE.

HOW CAN YOU BE THIS USELESS? (-GRUMBLE- YOUR PARENTS ARE DEAD LUCKY I SETTLED FOR SUCH A PALTRY DOWRY.)



(-SIGH- YES, LUCKY THEM...)

SHH! QUIET! WHAT WAS THAT SOUND?



EEE!

NOW WHAT--
ACK!

FVVOOMP!



WHAT IS THIS??
WHAT'S HAPPENING!?

DAMMIT! YOU SPRUNG A HUNTER'S TRAP. WHY DON'T YOU WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING FOR A CHANGE!





LOWER THAT TRAP, OR SO
HELP ME, I'LL STICK THIS
SPEAR RIGHT UP YOUR--



SNIFE!

YOU OTTERS ARE ALL THE
SAME. "DO THIS", "MINE
THAT", STEALING FROM
ME, TRESPASSING IN MY
FOREST. THINK YOU OWN
EVERYTHING. GET OUT OF
HERE, THIS IS MY FOOD.

BUH...BUH...WHA?
E-F... FOOD?



(DON'T WORRY, MY
DUMPLING, I HAVE
A PLAN..)

(THIS IS NO TIME TO TALK
ABOUT FOOD! HOW DO YOU
EXPECT TO OVERPOWER THIS
GUY, HE'S ENORMOUS!)

(HE DOESN'T SEEM TOO SMART,
I'LL JUST FOOL HIM WITH AN
OFFER HE CAN'T REFUSE, THEN
GATHER REINFORCEMENTS. I'LL
BE BACK AT SUNSET.)

(WHAT?? DON'T
LEAVE ME HERE!)



YE WHO WEARS LITTLE
CLOTHING! SPARE THIS
OTTER'S LIFE, AND I'LL
RETURN WITH A FEAST YOU
WON'T FORGET!

WHAT IF YOU TAKE TOO LONG
AND I GET HUNGRY? I MIGHT
HAVE TO EAT YOUR FRIEND AND
WAIT FOR YOU TO COME BACK
WITH DESSERT.

UH... POINT TAKEN.



THAT IS A RISK
I'M GOING TO
HAVE TO TAKE!





ARE YOU REALLY
GOING TO EAT ME?



WHY NOT? THERE AIN'T
MUCH TO YA, BUT
PICKIN'S ARE SLIM THESE
DAYS, WHAT WITH YOUR
KIND SCARING OFF ALL
THE WILDLIFE AND
STEALING MY SUPPLIES.

MIGHT HAVE TO START
SETTING OTTER TRAPS!



TRADE YOU FOR A
"FEAST"? THAT FRIEND
OF YOURS MUST THINK
I'M PRETTY DUMB!



IF I WERE YOU, I'D'VE
TAKEN OFF LICKITY
SPLIT THE MOMENT THE
NET CAME DOWN--

PLEASE, JUST MAKE IT QUICK.
I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE
TO BE EATEN, BUT I'D GUESS
IT ISN'T PLEASANT.

QUICK? IS THAT SOME KINDA TRICKERY SO I'LL
LET MY GUARD DOWN? IF YOU UNTIED YOURSELF
AND ESCAPED, YOU'D TELL ALL YOUR FRIENDS
ABOUT ME, AND I'D NEVER CATCH YOU!


I COULDN'T RUN FASTER
THAN YOU ANYWAY. AND
WHERE WOULD I GO?

YEAH. DON'T
YOU FORGET IT.





BETTER GET YOU
PREPPED FOR EAT'N!




HOLD STILL, LITTLE GUY.
CAN'T HAVE ANY OF THIS,
DARN STRINGS ALWAYS
GET CAUGHT IN MY TEETH.




HOLD UP A SEC.... WHAT'S THIS?
YOU'RE NOT A GUY AT ALL!

IS THAT BAD?




NAH, FEMALES ALWAYS
TASTE BETTER. MUST BE
THE DRUMSTICKS.



ANY LAST WORDS
BEFORE I DIG IN?

WHAT DO PEOPLE USUALLY SAY
AS THEIR LAST WORDS?



BEG ME TO LET YOU GO,
SO YOU CAN RUN HOME TO
THAT STUPID OF YOURS?

THIS IS THE FARTHEST I'VE BEEN FROM HOME, AND THE
MOST EXCITING THING THAT'S EVER HAPPENED TO ME.
I'VE KNOWN THAT "STUPID" A MATTER OF DAYS, AND HE'S A
JERK. MY LIFE IS HARDLY WORTH BEGGING FOR.



MAYBE I COULD
INTRODUCE YOU TO
SOME REAL
EXCITEMENT?

HA- WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

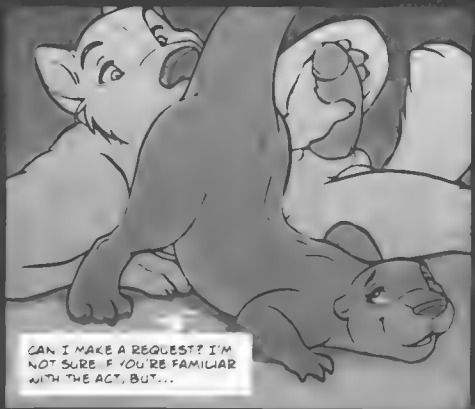
LET ME SHOW YOU...



GOODNESS ME! WHO
WOULD DO SUCH A
THING DOWN THERE...



OH! THAT'S SO GOOD! I *GASP*
C-CAN'T EVEN DESCRIBE IT!




CAN I MAKE A REQUEST? I'M
NOT SURE IF YOU'RE FAMILIAR
WITH THE ACT, BUT...



YEAH, I KNOW WHAT
THIS IS, AND I DON'T
THINK IT'S POSSIBLE.


IT'S WORTH A SHOT,
RIGHT? I'VE HEARD
STORIES OF FEMALES
FROM OUR TRIBE
MATING WITH LARGER
FELLOWS LIKE
YOURSELF...

IF WHAT THEY
SAID WAS ANY
INDICATION, YOU
WOULDN'T BE THE
LEAST BIT
DISAPPOINTED!



ARE YOU SURE THIS
IS GONNA FIT?

THEORETICALLY?




I GOTTA SAY, YOU'RE THE
TIGHTEST LITTLE THING I'VE
EVER CRAMMED MYSELF INTO...

S-SEE? DIDN'T I -OH-
TELL YOU IT WOULD
-MME!- WORK?




-NNH!- SO FAR SO GOOD! I
BET I'M A BIT MORE FILLING
THAN THAT -ERF- SHRIMPY
BOYFRIEND OF YOURS...

-AH!- HE'S ANYTHING BUT
ENDOWED-- OOF! AND YOU'RE
ABSOLUTELY HUGE...




I AIN'T GONNA LAST LONG
WITH ALL THIS -MM- FLATTERY
YOU'RE HANDING OUT!

-OH!- LAST? WHAT'S
GOING TO HAPPEN?




IT'S ALL IN! I CAN'T TAKE IT
ANY MORE... -HURK!-

OH, GOODNESS!




YOU HAVE... NO... IDEA HOW LONG
IT'S BEEN SINCE I'VE HAD A GIRL
AROUND FOR THAT.




-EH... SOME MORE
-THAN OTHERS.

I DIDN'T KNOW
YOU BOYS WERE
SO NESSY!



I'M ALMOST AFRAID
TO ASK, BUT... DO
YOU REALLY INTEND
TO EAT ME?

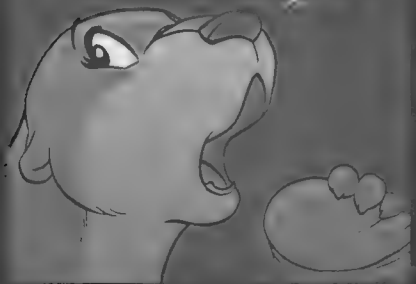
NOT AT ALL: I TRIED TO
SCARE YOU OFF, BUT YOU
WERE ACTING SO DEFEATED,
IT JUST DIDN'T WORK. SO I
DECIDED TO SHOW YOU A
GOOD TIME TO MAKE UP FOR
THE TROUBLE.



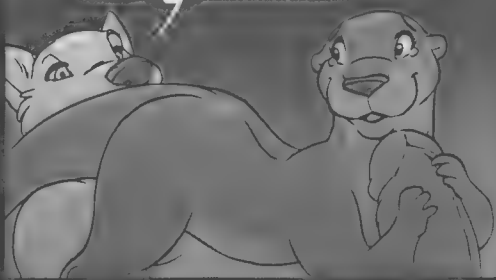
I REALIZED YOU MIGHT NOT BE ACCEPTED BY EITHER CLAN AFTER A
GUY LIKE ME'S HAD HIS WAY WITH YOU, BUT FIGURED YOU MIGHT
LIKE TO BE MY PERSONAL TRAVEL COMPANION. FOOD, PROTECTION,
ADVENTURE IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS, AND ALL THE SLOPPY WOLF
SEX YOU COULD ASK FOR. WHADDA YA SAY TO THAT?

YNNHEMGFF!?

YOU MEAN... YOU'D REALLY WANT ME TO COME WITH YOU, AND BE YOUR COMPANION?



WELL YEAH! IT'S NOT EVERY DAY I MEET A GIRL WHO'S INTERESTING TO TALK TO, AND A FANTASTIC LAY. DOES THAT MEAN YOU'RE GAME?



YES! YES I'D LOVE TO COME WITH YOU!

MMMMFHMM!



WOW, THAT DIDN'T TAKE MUCH THOUGHT! BUT WHAT ABOUT YOUR MAN? WON'T HE HUNT ME DOWN 'TIL THE END OF TIME FOR "EATING" YOU?

HMMM...



"HMMM"? WHERE YOU GOING?



AH, HERE THEY ARE!

I HAVE AN IDEA THAT'LL GET THE POINT ACROSS, BUT I'LL NEED A FEW MORE REPEAT PERFORMANCES FROM YOU. THINK YOU CAN HANDLE THAT, BIG GUY?



THAT MUCH I CAN ASSURE YOU...

THIS IS THE PLACE, SO SPREAD OUT AND START SEARCHING! I WON'T REST UNTIL THIS BRUTE IS FOUND AND MADE TO PAY FOR THE TERRIBLE EVILS HE'S COMMITTED TO ONE OF OUR OWN!



SIR:



THE GUYS FOUND SOMETHING,
WE THINK YOU SHOULD SEE IT.



I FAIL TO SEE WHAT'S
SO AMUSING ABOUT--



...THIS?



fin

*I thought I bought a
Well...*



by Kandrel

illustrated by Negger

A taste of the wild,
right? And you don't
think I fit the bill.

*Of
the*

W
I
L
D

Neon lights shone through the double-glazed hotel windows, adding a vibrant life to the otherwise dark and desolate room. I don't know why hotels insist on keeping their suites bleak and colorless, as if to defy the metropolis' gaudy shades of green and blue and burgundy and yellow so harsh it burns your retinas. I guess for some city-dwellers it would be a nice, safe retreat from the offensive noises and smells of the city, but not for me. I already had that peaceful sanctuary back home. I came to the city for the violent assault on your senses, the smoke so thick you can taste it, the lights blinking at epileptic speed, and the constant noise that leaves your ears ringing.

I stood naked by the window, letting the eddies from the updraft caress my skin. Far below, I could hear the honking and bleeping and cursing of the teeming streets, and far above I heard the bass groaning of a jet engine. The neon lights washed across my body, painting me like a peacock as imagined by Picasso. I took a deep breath, the recirculated and reprocessed hotel air mixing with the stagnantly heavy city smog, producing a tonic more toxic than any cigarette.

Behind me, I heard a card fumble in the magnetic lock on the door. Its owner tugged at the doorknob. Still locked. I heard the card wiggle in its slot once more, then the satisfying click of the bolt sliding back, and the door opening. I didn't turn around. Claws dragged on the worn carpet, snagging every few hesitant steps.

"Jacob?"

I took another deep breath, then turned around. I leaned back against the half-open window, staying in the chaotic medley of reflected neon advertisements. "Right. That means you're 'Zimmer'." I'm a good speaker, and a better actor. I knew that he'd hear the quotation marks. We both knew it wasn't his real name, any more than "Jacob" was mine.

"So..." He started uncertainly.

I looked at Zimmer frankly, letting my eyes linger on his body. Immaculately combed red fur disappeared under a black suit, white shirt, and what must pass as a "colorful" tie. A real

businessman, I thought, about as far from a "fox" as you can get while still claiming to be the species. Try as I might, I couldn't imagine this prim and proper corporate drone scampering around the woods like the foxes I knew back home. They were wily and clever, carefree and fickle as a summer breeze (and about twice as difficult to catch).

Instead this fox, carrying his briefcase that smelled of cigar smoke, was the city embodied. His red fur was bright and lustrous, shining with an unnatural sheen that could only come from high quality fur care products. His snout was flawless, and his eyes had the second reflective gleam of contact lenses. Even his whiskers were groomed, mathematically precise and controlled, with not a hint of the wild and crazy. Somewhere in my black, jaded heart, I pitied the fox. All of my instincts told me that he'd never even been to anything that could properly be called the wilds.

Well, I guess that's why the city called me here from my home, all the way by plane and train and taxi. I was "a taste of the raw and untamed," the advertisement read in its muted black and white print. Experience the thrill of the wilds from the comfort of your very own city. Yeah, wild and untamed, that was me all over. Not one of these city automatons ever knew what they were really getting into.

"You brought payment?" I asked, direct and to the point.

"Over the phone, they took my credit card."

"And they sent you a receipt?"

"Yeah." The fox held his briefcase in front of him, shielding himself from the embarrassment of paying for this escape from his urban prison. A limp scrap of paper dangled from his outstretched paw, and the garbled punch-script of a cheap printer wandered aimlessly across its front.

"Good. Leave it on the table, along with your briefcase."

The fox started towards the table, then paused for a moment. "Um, will he be here soon?"

I let my arms spread to the sides, leaning back against the window frame casually. "He who?" I played along. I'd heard it before, the confusion, the disappointment. This fox had lost his touch. He trusted his eyes too much, and his nose too little.

"Well, I thought I bought a...Well..."

"A taste of the wild, right?" I finished the thought for him. "Untamed. Nature in all its fury and passion, right?" The fox nodded as he placed his briefcase on top of the desk, knocking over the cheap complimentary coffee mug. He caught it with an off-handed motion, placing it next to his briefcase. I made a quick mental note to make sure I broke it later.

"And you think I don't fit the bill."

His eyes focused on me sharply, finally giving me the same appraising glance that I'd given him not a minute ago.

"You're it? But you're...You can't be."

"I can, and I am. What, you think I'm not capable of being the unbridled avatar of all things wild because I'm..." I trailed off, letting Zimmer finish the sentence for me. I saw him mouth the word, even though his politically correct corporate inbreeding wouldn't let him finish the thought out loud.

"Human."

I pushed myself away from the wall and walked towards the center of the room, the crazy painting of light across my skin fading until just the whitish-blue nimbus of diffuse city lights colored me. I knew I was about as good an example as you can get of human, but even fit and muscled, the fox still stood half a foot taller than me on his over-long legs. If I could get through that civilized veneer, he was probably stronger than I was as well. That's just how canids were built.

"So is that all you see, Zimmer? Just a human?" I walked towards him, and the fox held his arms in front of him, almost instinctively trying to ward me away.

"Well, that's what you are. What kind of hoax is this?"

"Is that what your eyes tell you?" I got close enough for him to smell, then when any normal person would have stopped, I kept walking. The fox stepped back for each step I took forward.

"Back off. I didn't pay for a human." Finally, I started to see little cracks in that hardened shell of a proper city lifestyle and proper city thinking. I kept walking towards him, and he kept stepping back until he ran out of hotel room to retreat across. He thumped against the magnolia-painted wall, planting his tail against it. I glanced down, watching his tail flick up between his legs. He had a pretty tail, the first feature of his that I would immediately say I approved of.

"Or what?" I took another step towards him, and his arm came forward in a wild swing. I caught his wrist, struggling for a moment. I was right, he was stronger than me, but that wouldn't matter in a moment. I knew how to fight, and he didn't.

"Stop! This isn't what I paid for!" He cried, a hint of panic seeping into his voice.

"Oh, no, Zimmer, this is exactly what you paid for, what they flew me all the way out from the middle of nowhere for." I pushed against his elbow, and his arm finally levered back. I pinned his arm against the wall as I took one final step, so close that I could feel the scratchy touch of his polyester suit.

I must say, that out of all the pleasurable parts of these evenings in the city, this part was my favorite. Finally, a certain smell broke through the fox's panic, and the mild panic broke into bewildered confusion. For all my skin and sweat glands and hair and humanity, I knew that I didn't smell human. It wasn't just cologne or body wash, it was natural, just like every other part of me.

The fox let his arm go limp for a moment as his nose twitched. "Wolf?" Good fox, I thought. Right on the head. Somewhere far above us, hidden by the high tops of the buildings, and the glow of phosphorescent signs, and the glowing smog of the city, the moon was full.

I let the change steal over me gradually, slow enough that the fox could watch as it happened. Fur sprouted from my skin in a slow wave, turning my skin almost black. It itched slightly, but as soon as it passed being stubble, the itch disappeared. There was no pain, no sensation of things breaking or bending as my ankles lengthened, and my nose stretched forward into a graceful muzzle.

The fox's stunned muzzle began to drift slowly down towards me, not because he was bending, but because I was growing. In a few seconds, I was staring him eye-to-eye, my newly-grown snout bumping against his as he tilted his gaze to watch me. With the transformation's speed increasing, the fox's muzzle passed my own on its downward path, and just seconds later, in a twist of perspective, I was gazing down at him. His head pressed back against the wall in alarm, ears pinned to his skull, and I heard a soft whine split the air.

"Not wild enough, Zimmer? Not close enough to your nightmares and fantasies?" My legs lengthened, sliding my balance and center of gravity forward until the only comfortable standing position pushed my chest heavily into the fox's. He let out a strangled yelp, caught between a werewolf more than twice his mass and the unmoving and uncaring hotel wall. I'd seen the old movies, and for all their cheesy special effects and computer rendered fur patterns, they never quite got the natural, almost sensual feel as skin and flesh and bone rippled into new configurations.

I ducked as the change added the last few inches to my height, avoiding a knock with the ceiling. Zimmer was now gazing up at me with an opaque expression, his body shivering slightly. Knowing my role, I stepped back, letting him see all of the wild night he'd purchased. He slumped as soon as my weight lifted from his chest, and his breath was coming in little ragged gasps. I could see my outline reflected in his eyes, the bright city lights lighting the fringes of my fur from behind like a glowing aura.

Just like I was a fine specimen of human, I knew I was an exceptional werewolf. One led to the other, really. My fur was black from snout to tail tip, not that it mattered in this light. Zimmer could only see me in silhouette anyway. My

shoulders were broad, and my back was arched a bit, giving just a hint of feral ancestry as I leaned forward on my arms. The change had given me powerful legs, meant for running and jumping and climbing, coiled like springs below me. Wind whipped through the room from the open windows, ruffling the fur of my newly sprouted tail playfully.

Against the wall, Zimmer's gaze finally started to clear, and he let out a thin whine, then a whimper. Good, he was ready. That was the right place to start.

I straightened a bit, keeping my head low to avoid the hotel's gaudy light fixtures, and grasped the fox around his middle. I pushed him back against the hotel wall with enough force to lift him from his feet. He struggled slightly as I leaned in, laying my muzzle alongside his as he squirmed in fear. "Now, now, Zimmer, you shouldn't have come straight from work. It's a shame to see that nice suit of yours ruined." Claws ran over the polyester, and he squirmed away from their touch, irrational fear still gripping his instincts. When I caught a seam, I pushed, then tugged, and the fabric parted beneath my fingers. The jacket of his suit ripped in lengthwise tatters, along with the thin cotton shirt he wore against his fur. I pulled carefully, my eyes watching intently as I bared more and more of the creamy white splash of fur down his front.

"Stop, please..." The fox whined again, kicking his legs a bit from where they hung suspended from the floor.

"You're not paying me to stop, Zimmer." I tugged again, and his suit and shirt finally came free, leaving just his tie hanging crookedly around his neck. Amused by it, I left it there. For the moment, it looked like nothing so much as a silk collar and leash.

I must admit, though, that I hadn't expected the fox to be in good physical shape. To my approval, he was. His white chest fur rippled over muscles that contracted as he shoved my hand. Even his belly was toned, with only a slight hint of healthy pudge. I lifted him further with the hand that was holding him against the wall, until his head was almost touching the ceiling.

"Oh, I am impressed, Zimmer. You take good care of yourself." I whispered, letting my breath stir his whiskers. He flinched as I rubbed my opposite hand over his belly. There was a pause, then he let out a whine that slowly turned into a moan. I'd done the scare, now it was time I made him want it.

The fox let out a long, shuddering breath, and his hands encircling my wrist stopped trying to push me away.

"Good fox. Very good. You're doing much better out of that stuffy suit." I pulled the last tatters of his ruined suit from the waist of his trousers and tossed it behind me towards the customary hotel bed. He squirmed again, and I squeezed around his middle. I let the paw on his belly lazily trace down, leaving little furrows in his fur where my claws dragged. They followed over the defined edges of his abs, then as they caught at the hem of his pants, they continued down, tugging at the fabric sharply.

The fox yipped in my grasp, and I gave him a bit of a feral smile, showing a mouth full of sharp teeth. I tugged again, and I felt a pop as the button of his fly snapped off. With the third tug, his zipper made a quick complaint as its teeth separated, and finally free, his trousers peeled away from his legs like an inferior second skin. The light from behind me was more than enough for my sensitive eyes, and I drank in the sight of the needy fox. His underwear was tented outwards, a stain of liquid spotting its front as his arousal blunted against the restraining fabric.

"What's this, Zimmer? Stop, you said?" I leaned in, breathing heavily against the fabric covering his crotch. The trapped flesh twitched, and the stain of liquid expanded down the cotton briefs.

Zimmer whined in my grasp, but the paws on my wrist disappeared. He was reaching down, his paws aiming for those sodden briefs. With a quick motion, I caught his arms, lifting them away from his crotch.

"Oh, no, no. Not so fast, Zimmer. You're going to stay just like that, until we're ready to move on." I was speaking directly to his crotch, my head ducked, hot breath wafting over the soaked fabric. He smelled strongly of fox, so strongly

that it made my nose twitch. As he shot more and more pre into the soaked cotton of his underpants, the fabric began to take on a translucent tinge, giving me a good preview of what I'd find underneath. With both of my hands busy holding the fox still, all I had left was my mouth. I dipped my head in towards his creamy white fur and caught the elastic hem of his briefs in my canines. With a growl and one last tug, the hem snapped.

The fox gave a sharp yip as the fabric around his crotch finally relented. I could feel his body tense and contract as I rode the fine line of his hair trigger. I let him ride that plateau for just a moment longer, before I gave a second tug. The tear spread from the hem and traveled quickly down the wet front, and the fox's dark red shaft pushed outward as the wet fabric peeled from around his twitching sheath. Finally free to jump and pulse as my hot breath washed over its bare skin, the fox shuddered in my grasp. A hot arc of semen jetted from its round, tapered tip and caught the front of my muzzle. My tongue flipped out, catching the next spurt as the fox's cock throbbed.

I let Zimmer hang against the wall as he rode his first orgasm. I took the opportunity to let my eyes really see what and who had bought me for the night. Counter to first impressions, I was beginning to be subtly impressed. Corporate drone he may be, but he took good care of himself. His muscle tone was even all across his body, giving the impression of good shape and an active lifestyle away from his desk. His fur apart from his head lacked the unattractive glimmer of fur care products, and simply looked well groomed, though the suit hadn't done his hide any favors.

As he wriggled a bit, his whole body giving little rolling humps as his cock twitched spunk onto the carpet, he showed just a hint of the sly, playful nature that should have been his racial heritage. His tail flicked randomly between his legs. I couldn't help but reach out and stroke it, the rust-colored fur soft and smooth, straight down to the explosion of white where the tail terminated.

Slowly, careful not to let the vulpine's muscles catch or twist, I lowered Zimmer to the floor. His legs gave out underneath him, and I let

him slide down to his knees. He sat motionless on the cheap carpet, breath ragged as he drank in gulps of recirculated hotel air. I sat back on my haunches, arms resting on my knees as I watched silent as a gargoyle, waiting for the customer to recover.

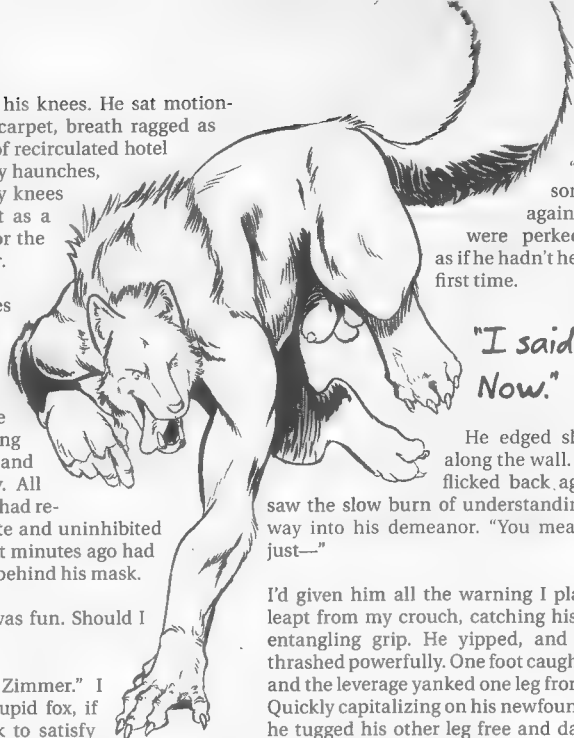
After long minutes of silence, broken only by Zimmer's rapidly calming breath, he finally stood. His eyes were still on me, watching me follow his gaze and fidgeting nervously. All of his city breeding had returned, and the cute and uninhibited fox I'd glimpsed just minutes ago had been hidden again behind his mask.

"Well, Jacob, that was fun. Should I call to—"

"We're not done, Zimmer." I growled at him. Stupid fox, if that was all it took to satisfy him. At my prices, I knew I had to have been worth at least a full paycheck of his. I'd seen quality cars that cost less than he was paying for tonight, and he was ready to walk away after just the foreplay? I could have walked out just then. It would have been an easy night, he went home satisfied, and I'd go home a bit richer. But as much as I longed to be out of the city, I couldn't leave it at just that. I had an image to uphold, and image was everything when your business was word of mouth.

And worse, beneath that annoying facade of city sensibilities, there was a fox that desperately wanted to have his wild adventures. It's why he'd called for me. It was the same fox I'd seen squirming so cutely in my hand not five minutes ago. No, the night wasn't over. Not if I had anything to say about it.

"Oh, well, what should I do now, then?" He paused, and it looked like he was attempting to cover himself, holding his hands over his sheath.



"Run."

"Err, sorry, say that again?" His ears were perked forward as if he hadn't heard me the first time.

"I said run. Now."

He edged slowly away along the wall. Those ears flicked back again, and I saw the slow burn of understanding wind its way into his demeanor. "You mean I should just—"

I'd given him all the warning I planned to. I leapt from my crouch, catching his legs in an entangling grip. He yipped, and those legs thrashed powerfully. One foot caught my bicep, and the leverage yanked one leg from my arms. Quickly capitalizing on his newfound freedom, he tugged his other leg free and dashed away from me.

As I lifted myself to my feet, crouched over like a four-legged wolf and glaring at him ferally, comprehension finally turned control over to his survival instincts. He bolted for the door, and a quick twist and yank saw him fleeing into the hotel corridor, disappearing from sight before the hastily opened door slammed against the doorjamb.

I smiled. Good fox.

Nose to the ground, I loped off after him. Each of my steps took me two of his. Crouched over, I was almost as tall as he was standing. I emerged blinking into the over-bright and sanitized hallway. The smell of fox turned sharply to the left, so with nose to the rough carpet, I began to give chase.

I trailed him closely: down the corridor, then left. Into the small room with the ice machine, and I found a puddle where he'd tried to mask his smell. He was inexperienced; he didn't know

that the water had to be running to carry away his scent. Back out to the hallway, and the trail disappeared into the elevator waiting room. His smell was everywhere: on the chairs, the wall, even over by the open window. I hoped he hadn't tried to go outside; he could get hurt like that. But each place I searched was wet, and it struck me. He'd doused himself with water from the ice machine, and was spreading his scent randomly to confuse me. He must have just shaken off here, and it'd won him a few scant seconds of confusion.

Surprise after surprise, this fox was forcing me to change my opinion of him constantly. He wasn't dumb, by any stretch. My muzzle pulled up into a smile, and for the first time in months of one-night-long "wild" hunts, I was really enjoying myself. My senses sharpened like the after-effects of the first whiff of bitch in heat of the spring, and my groin gave a little twist of longing. This fox was going to be a worthy catch, and I was truly looking forward to the denouement.

I flashed back out into the hallway, rebounding off of the far wall as I sprinted down the scent trail that led from the elevator room. The corridor split into a T, and the trail went both ways. I ran my hand over the fresh carpet backwards, using an old trick I'd learned early in my career. Recent paw prints stood out in the rug's grain. He'd gone right first, then returned and gone left. I sprinted off to the left, claws digging furrows in the carpet that'd cause the housekeeping staff to have a conniption. I could smell him, he was that close.

Then I turned a corner and skidded to a halt at a dead end. Nonplussed, I spun around. Nothing. No sign of the fox. I sniffed back, then the wide smile on my muzzle split into a giddy grin. He'd doubled back. There weren't any signs of it, but I knew with the surety of a seasoned hunter that I was right. While I was messing around in the elevator waiting room, he'd doubled back. Smart, tricky fox.

Thundering down the hallway at top speed, I crashed into the wall of the T intersection, letting the wall take the brunt of my forward momentum rather than slowing down. There, at the end of the hallway, was a flash of red tail as he turned the corner.

Got you, you sneaky git.

As soon as my feet touched the ground, I was off again. In the time it took to draw a single breath, I'd rounded the corner towards the room we'd started in, and I saw him sprinting away from me, eyes gazing in a panic over his shoulder. A single leap was all it took to catch his legs, and he went down heavily on the floor.

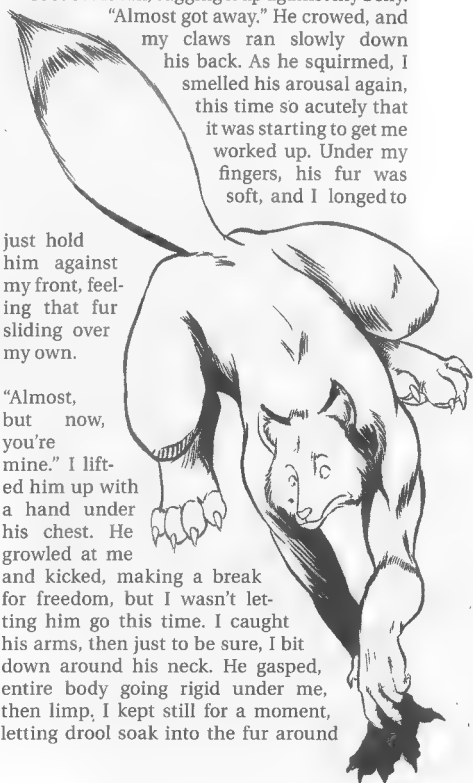
He let out another whine as my heavy paw landed in the small of his back, pinning him to the ground. "Got you, little fox." I breathed the words into his ear as I climbed slowly over his pinned form. "You're much better at this than you look." I meant it, too. I'd never been lead a chase like that by one of these spoiled city drones.

He clawed a bit at the carpet as I grabbed the root of his tail, tugging it up against my belly.

"Almost got away." He crowed, and my claws ran slowly down his back. As he squirmed, I smelled his arousal again, this time so acutely that it was starting to get me worked up. Under my fingers, his fur was soft, and I longed to

just hold him against my front, feeling that fur sliding over my own.

"Almost, but now, you're mine." I lifted him up with a hand under his chest. He growled at me and kicked, making a break for freedom, but I wasn't letting him go this time. I caught his arms, then just to be sure, I bit down around his neck. He gasped, entire body going rigid under me, then limp. I kept still for a moment, letting drool soak into the fur around



his shoulders and ears from either side of my muzzle. I was careful not to crush, but his fur was soft and pliable under my tongue, my teeth pressing into his pelt firmly enough, just shy of drawing blood.

Finally sure that he'd obey, I lifted him bodily from the floor. Now dangling in my grip, I hugged him tight against my front. His feet bumped against my thighs, and his tail squirmed against my belly, until it found its way off to the side. My arms curled around him, hands rubbing over his silky fur. With a moan loud enough to echo hollowly about the empty corridor, Zimmer wrapped his hands up and around the back of my head, giving himself leverage to start wiggling and squirming against my body.

All mine, I thought, marveling at the feel of the fox's soft fur against mine. The hot little vulpine wriggling in my lap was so far removed from the stuffy businessman that had walked through my hotel room door half an hour ago that he was almost unrecognizable. Much to my surprise, this wasn't just a job anymore. Zimmer was cute out of that suit of his, and fit, and soft, and the way he squirmed...

I just couldn't help myself as he squirmed: I sat back into a crouch, using my thighs to pull his kicking legs apart. The motion pulled him back against my belly and sat his rust-colored rump squarely on top of my sheath. When he felt the fuzzy pouch nudge beneath his tail, his squirming took a whole new urgency. He was rolling his hips in small, eager circles, working the tip of my sheath back and forth between the cleft of his rump cheeks. His thighs clenched from where they were trapped behind mine.

In my canid form, everything around me seemed amplified. Colors were more colorful, smells (especially smells) were vibrant and sharp, even emotions and feelings felt like they were more real than when I wore skin. So when the fox ground himself back against me, the sensory overload of his smell, plus the feel of his soft fur against me, and the knowledge that this surprisingly hot little fox wanted me to take him, was just a bit too much for me to resist. I let out a feral growl, and I felt the sudden touch of flesh against flesh as my own arousal rose to the occasion. It was hot, and it was smooth, and

it was wet, oh so wet. I'd probably been soaking the fox's ass in pre since I first caught him, but only now did I realize just how slick it was.

And it was only about to get better. There, in the hallway, beneath the over-bright fluorescent lights, and staining the immaculately clean rugs with our lust, I pulled the city fox down onto my shaft. With a pop that both of us felt more than heard, his pucker slid slickly over my cock tip, then clenched. Restrained in my arms, the fox gave a pained whine. I paused, training and experience telling me I should let him get used to my girth, but the fox was having none of that. He wriggled down in my grip, and that tight ring of muscle slid down my length as his tailhole rolled my sheath back. Finally beaten, I gave a muffled bark of my own around his neck. I lidded my eyes for a moment, caught in a moment of pure, unalloyed pleasure.

Finally, the fox stopped wiggling. He sat on my sheath, panting around his tongue. I could feel his pulse under my teeth, strong and quick, and it took a veritable feat of restraint to keep my jaw muscles from biting down, and my leg muscles from thrusting forward. Instead, I let his neck go. He was just too sexy, too fuckable, and too much of a fox to trust my teeth around his spine. My control was already slipping dangerously, and I didn't want to endanger him.

"Ready, Zimmer?" I asked softly into his ear, nipping it slightly as he rotated his rump on the invading shaft.

"Don't ask me, just do it." He pressed his back into my chest, and I felt his vertebrae rubbing against my ribs. Shivering with anticipation, I hugged around his front with one arm, holding him to me like an oversized plush doll. I leaned forward, until my other arm could swing forward, and I steadied myself on three limbs. Without any further warning, I stood.

Gravity and inertia did the rest of my work for me. As my legs straightened and my hips rolled forward, inch after inch of lupine cock slid from my sheath. Zimmer let out another long whine, punctuated by harsh yipping, as the entirety of my shaft slipped into his clenching rump. Below us, a pool of liquid had soaked into the carpet. I took a careful step forward. Just a few steps away, the door to our room stood wide

open. Hugging Zimmer to my front, I padded carefully forward.

Meanwhile, the fox had wrapped his arms around my neck, holding on and trying to take some pressure off of his rump. Still, every step slid me back and forth in his tight tailhole. He clenched, drawing a stuttering breath, then relaxed, and I felt his pucker kiss my sheath.

Reaching the room, I bent forward to fit through the doorframe. Behind me, I slammed the door shut, blocking out the artificial day of the hotel's interior. Our room was bathed in the neon-tinged bluish haze of reflected city light. Everything was as we'd left it: a shredded suit by the bed, trousers clumped in a little puddle of fabric by the desk, and thin claw-marks marring the magnolia paint.

Trying to ignore the subtle friction of flesh around flesh, I took two steps to the side of the desk. Zimmer gave a muffled complaint as my footsteps jostled him against my sheath. When I finally stood in front of the desk, I released my grip around his midsection. Zimmer bent forward at the waist, and his forearms slapped the faux-wood surface of the shoddy table. He opened his mouth to give another complaint, but all that emerged was a shuddering whine under his shallow breath as I rolled my hips in a firm thrust. The time for speaking had long since passed.

The tight tunnel squeezed around my length in quick little spasms as I shifted, but gave a prolonged clench as I started to pull my hips back. I heard a soft, almost inaudible slurping sound as inches of my cock slid free of his rump. I moved slowly to begin with, letting Zimmer feel every ridge and bump and vein of my shaft as his sphincter clamped down around it. Then, when the cupped taper at the tip of my cock slipped free of his hot little hole, I thrust.

Zimmer was pushed forward across the desk, until his hips met its rim. His arms slid, pushing everything in front of him to the floor. His briefcase knocked hollowly against the carpet, the complimentary pen and packets of coffee landing on the floor next to it. The fox rewarded me with a growling moan, and the velvety tunnel squeezed.

Our growls and moans resonated in the room, bouncing strangely off of the thin plaster walls. He squirmed and writhed, the cock buried in his hind end forcing him to keep his legs bent. I held the desk as I bent over him, hips pounding away at his russet-furred flanks. His arm shot out, keeping balance on the wobbling tabletop, and my next thrust forced him to send the complimentary coffee mug careening off, shattering against the wall in front of him. The desk wobbled uncertainly, its joints rocking apart.

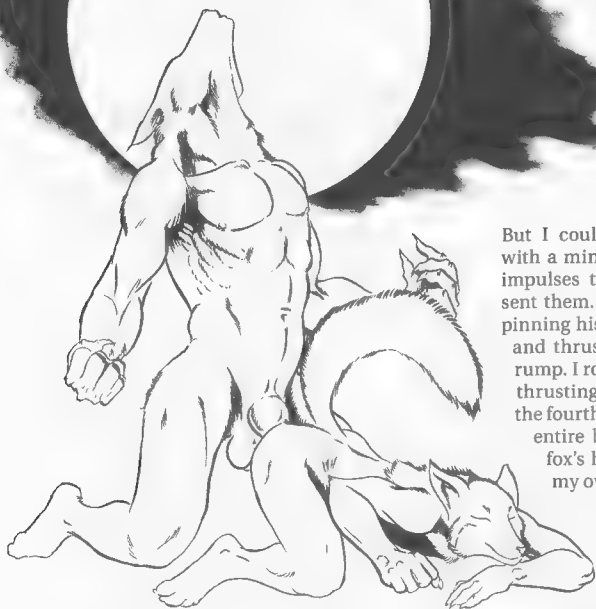
I reached down and grabbed him, just as the desk finally collapsed forward with the crackle of cheap press-board and wood glue. He relaxed, leaning against my front, as both of us looked down at the ruined furniture bemusedly.

"Is this place, you know..."

"Yeah, the company insures it." I responded, before he could finish the thought. It was only after I answered that I realized the fox's gambit. In a moment of inattention, I'd dropped the act. I'd lost the character. Shit.

Zimmer's city life must have included some intense training in people skills, because almost immediately after I realized my mistake, he spurred into action. He wrapped his arms over my neck again, and with a deft rolling of his hips, he pulled himself completely off of my rigid length. I figured I'd given him his taste as planned, and there was still a bit of the night left. He staggered off towards the bed, but before he reached its cushioned mattress to support his battered knees, he bent and put his hands to the ground. The fox crawled forward a few feet on all fours, then looked back at me over his shoulder. "Please?" He begged, "It's my favorite..."

Peering at that vulnerable fox, gazing up at me with longing and need, I realized that I was smitten. Maybe not completely, my rational mind butted in, it was just physical. But it was there, nonetheless. I wanted to fuck him, oh yes, a certain part of my body reminded me of that, but afterwards, I wanted to wrap him up in my arms and steal him away to the wild hills of my home and chase every hint of city from his gorgeous body. Maybe we'd even come back to the city to visit, and we'd tear up hotels and bars and night clubs. There'd be a picture of us



beneath the front desk, letting the attendants know to keep us away...

While my mind had been wandering, my body had taken over. I was crouched again, arms forward and knuckles touching the floor. Shaking my head of the idyllic visions, I caught myself loping towards Zimmer, drooling slightly at the strong smell of male fox. My conscious mind returned as I tugged at his hips, crouching over him with my neck bent down to catch the ruff of his neck tightly between my jaws. That gorgeous tail of his brushed softly over my dripping shaft, and I gave an involuntary jerk of my hips. That tease, I'd teach him to—

It had taken a few seconds for the pressure around the tip of my shaft to register to my conscious mind. When it did, it was all I could do to keep myself from biting down as my hips

jerked forward. That tight ring of muscle enveloped my shaft as Zimmer lifted his hips to my crotch, his tail wagging against my lower belly. The fox whined, and he clenched down in a single, rigid shiver. A new scent hit my nose, slightly bitter with a faint hint of chlorine. That was familiar enough: the fox was cumming again. Professionally, I knew I should stop and let him enjoy his orgasm. He'd paid for the night, so the time was his, not mine.

But I couldn't stop myself. My hips moved with a mind of their own, ignoring the feeble impulses that my rational and logical mind sent them. I pushed down on Zimmer's back, pinning his chest to the floor as I tugged back and thrust deep, bottoming out in his tight rump. I rolled my hips, pulling back out, then thrusting again. Then a third time. And on the fourth, as my sheath kissed his pucker, my entire body gave a familiar shiver, as the fox's hot ass pushed me over the edge of my own orgasm.

I rewarded Zimmer with a last piece of "The Wild" as I shuddered and twitched over his rump. Caught in the moment, I lifted my head to the ceiling and howled. It started high, then slowly dropped in pitch as the velvety tunnel around my shaft went silky with semen. The howl bounced off of the hollow hotel walls and rang melodically with the faint susurrations of traffic passing twenty stories below. Slowly, as my orgasm faded into a tingling afterglow, my howl faded into a cough, and I collapsed next to the fox.

We both lay there, I don't know how long. Long enough that I counted three passenger jets thunder past overhead. If I were a resident of the city, I might be able to set my watch by them (if I wanted my watch to run half an hour slow, that is). As my arousal slipped and faded, leaving both of us covered in sticky juices, Zimmer turned and snuggled into my side. I wrapped my arm around his back, holding the fox close, and for the first time in my many trips to the city, I found myself not just happy, but fulfilled.

Minutes passed, then hours. I think somewhere in that time, Zimmer fell asleep. His careful city manicure had been ruined. I couldn't see even a glimmer in his head fur, and most of his beautiful pelt was matted, soaked, and sticky. I could count the night a success.

Unlike Zimmer, though, I couldn't sleep, not while the full moon rode the sky. As content as I was with the fox at my side, my bladder was telling me that I should probably attend to business soon. With some regret, I fished my arm out from under the fox, then shook it as pins and needles crept up my fingers. I gave the fox a glance as I stumbled to the bathroom, and what I saw dragged a smile to my muzzle. Without me, he'd curled up, nose buried in his tail.

I closed the door to the bathroom behind me, though it occurred to me that it was a bit of a meaningless gesture. Still, as little as I cared about propriety, most city types were sticklers for privacy.

Just as I aimed my sheath towards the receptacle, I heard a monotone bleep from just outside the bathroom door. It was my business phone, and I had three more rings before I missed the call. Typical.

I grimaced as I squeezed, wincing at the slight burn as I manually stopped my business midstream. With a tight grip, I danced to the bathroom door, cracked it open just wide enough to fumble for my coat, and dragged the miniature cell phone from its pocket. On the third ring, I managed to fumble it open, and finally resumed my previous business as I put the phone to my ear.

"Sorry to be rude, Loraine, but you caught me in the bathroom. What's the emergency?" I tried to keep my voice down, but it's hard not to sound like you're shouting in those echoing, tile-encrusted bathrooms so endemic to inner city hotels.

"I just got a call from Zimmer. He's asked why you needed to postpone, and if it'd be the same hotel."

My ears rang a bit as I finished urinating, but my wandering attention snapped to crystal



clarity on the phone. "Sorry, Loraine, say that again?"

"Zimmer asked why you postponed, and if it'd be the same hotel. What's going on, Jacob? It's not like you to call a customer directly. I thought you liked the whole mysterious approach." While she talked, my ears caught a gentle click from the room behind me. Crawling through the sluggish quagmire of post-orgasmic apathy, the "click" sounded like something going very, very wrong.

"Loraine, call you back." I closed the phone before I could hear her complaint, and stiff-legged it back into the main room.

The floor where Zimmer had been sleeping was bare, except for the stains we'd left behind. The fox was nowhere to be found.

"Ooohhh no. Fucking no." A cold feeling crept up my spine, and I kicked at the tumbled desk. It was somewhere here, it had to be.

I saw the thin, scrawling piece of receipt paper and snatched it up with shaking fingers. With the room too dark to read, I stumped over to the window and held it up to the faint city lights behind me. To my dismay, it was just a pharmacy receipt for over-the-counter muscle relaxants. On the flip side, in a jittery scrawl, someone had penned in, "Thanks for the fantastic night! XOXO -The Fox"

I crumpled the receipt as a faint growl built in my throat. That thieving son of a bitch. Red spotted my vision as I sprinted for the door.

I didn't bother unlocking the door. It shattered off of its hinges as I hit it at full speed. Without a doubt as to his destination, I barreled down the hallway to the elevator lounge. Just as I arrived, I heard the double-thump of the express elevator doors closing.

I pounded on the down arrow in fury. After I heard an alarming crack from the metal faceplate, I pulled my hand back, not willing to let my rage ruin my chances of catching him. I couldn't stand still, though. My legs ached with the need to run and jump and pursue and catch. It was an almost physical pain standing still, so instead I paced, back and forth across the elevator room, until the third door in a row of four gave a cheery "ding" and opened.

I jerked myself inside and pounded the big "G" at the bottom of the list of floors. With a sedate pace that seemed even slower through my rage-soaked senses, the doors crept closed. I growled and cursed, because I didn't even have enough room to pace anymore. I heard another "ding", and glancing at the indicator at the top, I saw we'd stopped at floor 17. The doors opened, and two margays in night clothes stood outside in a high-identical elevator lobby. I stared out at them, and they stared in at me. I saw two surprised hotel guests. They saw a hulking wolf, so large that I had to bend my head to avoid hitting it on the top of the elevator. It was only when the doors began to close again, the couple still outside, that I remembered that I was still

naked, and that my crotch was matted and visibly sticky, and smelled like fox.

Luckily, that was the last stop before the ground level.

As the doors crept open, I reached between them and yanked. They shot to the sides with whirring of springs, and I dashed out into the blindingly bright lobby. Without a glance to either side, I sprinted to the front doors, aiming for the one that read "push to open." At my speed, I'd have gone straight through the revolving door without stopping, and most of the glass would have come with me. I exploded onto the street corner just in time to see nothing. I glanced left, and there was a car coming my direction, its high beams on. I glanced right, and I saw a bus speeding away from its stop a block and a half down.

And gazing back at me from the bus's rear window was a fox. I couldn't see below his shoulders, but I bet he'd grabbed his trousers on his dash from our room. As the bus accelerated away, I could swear the fox smiled back at me. His finger lifted and drew a heart in the dusty window. Then the bus hit the ramp to the freeway, and disappeared into the night.

I stood on the street in front of the hotel for minutes, somehow expecting the bus to come rolling back down with that fox. And when it got here, I'd pick him up, and I'd tear him limb from limb. Or maybe, instead, I'd kiss him. Or maybe I'd take him back up to the room and we'd spend the rest of the night, though I'm pretty sure I wasn't really considering sleep as an option.

While I stood there, a couple passed by on the street. I saw them staring at me, and didn't care. A car rolled past the hotel, and a mink girl of somewhere between 8 and 10 leaned out the window and took a picture of my crotch on her cell phone. Then a policeman came by. He said he was understanding, and that if I'd just put some god damn pants on, he'd look the other way, and we could all get on with our lives.

So just before I went back into the hotel, where my jeans and jacket were tucked away in a now-empty room, and where Loraine was probably still ringing, I raised my hand and gave the fox a lazy salute. Because foxes are wily and clever, carefree and fickle as a summer breeze (and about twice as difficult to catch). And if you ever catch one, you'd better hold tight, because you never know when your cell phone will ring, and when you look back, they'll be gone.



ODD COUPLING

• yawn •

It was your basic
spring morning

I got out of
my den, stretched my legs,
adjusted my eyes to the light,
everything the way it always
was each morning

Including the us-
ual morning
stiffness

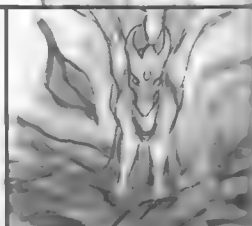
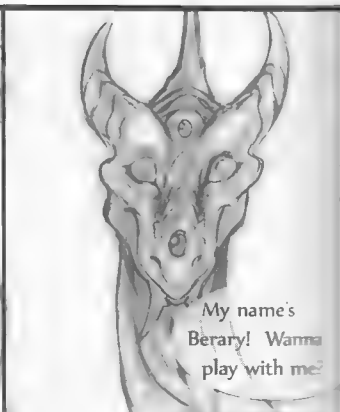
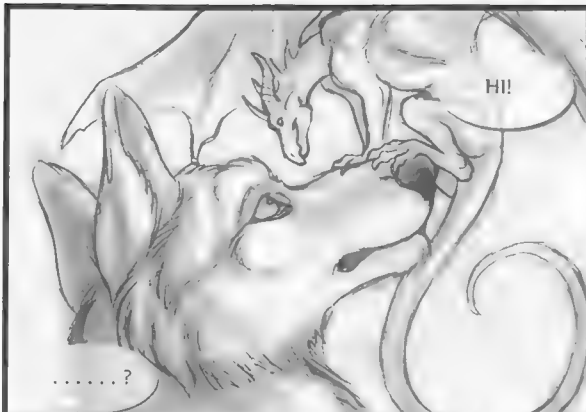
But then... I was
used to that by now.

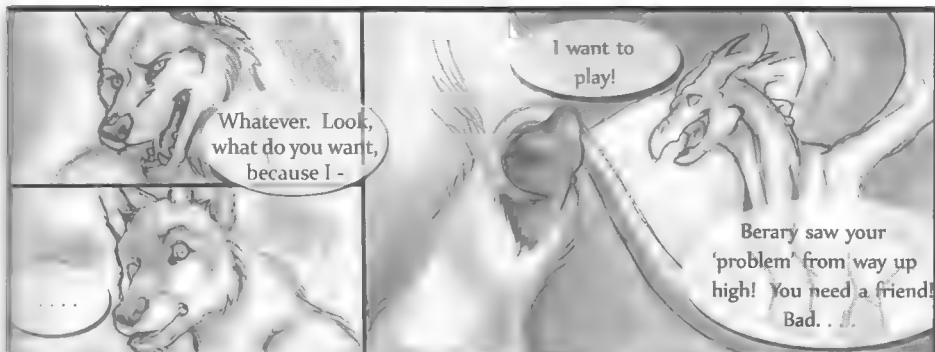
I've always been
pretty fond of solitude,
but sometimes you really
want someone.

Still, it's been awhile
since I'd found a good bitch or a
good wolf out in my territory, and I
figured the chances were slim only.
So, I was all set to 'handle' things
myself...

Then, as things've
got a way of doing... something
entirely unexpected sort of...
fell into my lap...

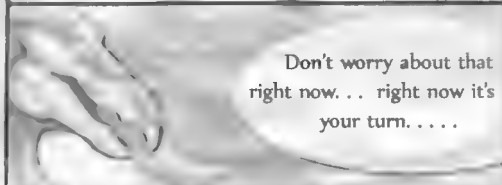
And I found that
what with no other choice...







A-alright. . . I dunno
what I can do for someone
your. . . size. . .



Don't worry about that
right now. . . right now it's
your turn. . . .



Wh-what are you. . .
what are you doing? Is that a . . .
.... spell? Feels really. . .
warm.





Unnnhhhhh!



sigh Alright.

I've gotta hand it to you, that was better than I expected. Thanks. So... what was it you wanted me to do...

It's Berary's turn, now! Are you ready to please ME?

Yeah sure. I guess.

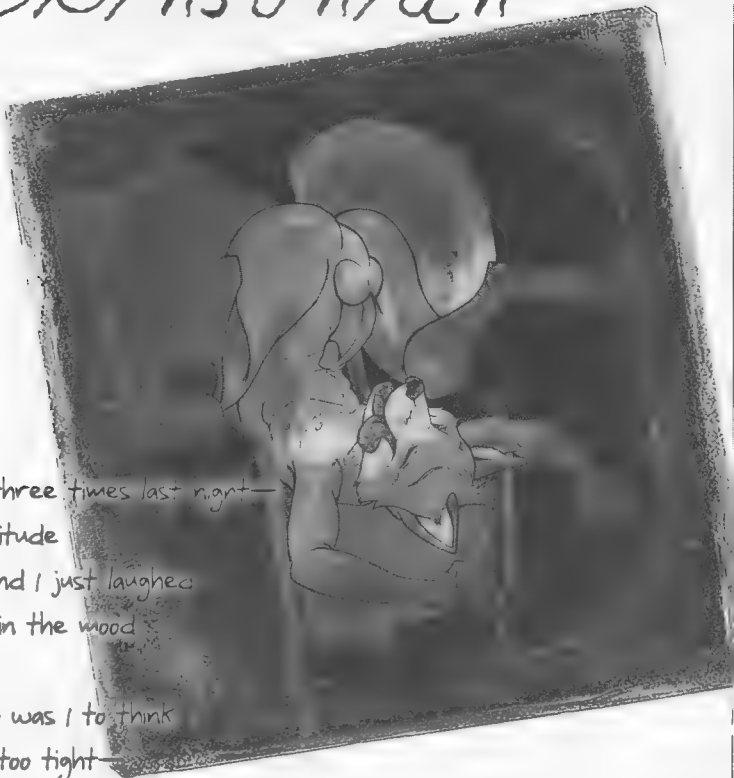
How exactly did you expect me to do this? You're, like, three feet long. And two of that is your tail. I'm not really sure what you expect me to do.

Want me to lick you, or something?





Dickinsonian



I took your load three times last night—
A feat of magnitude
You texted me and I just laughed
Cause you were in the mood

But—really—who was I to think
My hole was still too tight—
You said you'd take it nice and slow
Unless I tried to fight

I'm sorry I was way too loud—
The neighbors called the cops
But left as soon as you explained
That I was just a fox—

by Whyte Yoté
illustrated by Dragondrawer

CODE DROP



by Tempe O'Kun

illustrated by Jailbird



Tess Hurr was a jackal learning to detest small towns.

She'd never been in one longer than it took to stare at the numbers on a gasoline pump. Today, however, she was building a strong case for hatred.

First, her car had relieved itself of some important part or another and detonated in a cacophony of grinding metal noises. Then the tow truck had taken all of three hours to find her. And finally, she discovered the nearest garage was in a town that seemed to consist entirely of a post office, the lone cafe she sat in, and three sullen bars.

Her fingers drummed on the hot plastic of her laptop. Still in her business slacks from the morning's meetings, she'd left the Cities with a car full of blue blazers and uncomfortable shoes. She was supposed to have arrived and uploaded her final revisions by now. She could not screw up this project. Fresh out of college, she was not about to discard the last year of her life spent interning at Electric Sheep Enterprises because she couldn't get a damn wireless signal. She had come to the cafe in the vain hope that it would have some form of Internet access, but apparently this town enjoyed being some sort of technological Twilight Zone.

Upon entering the cafe, she had gotten bad coffee and worse wireless reception. Make that none. The summer sun was drowning in the horizon, a mere sliver left, sinking along with her hopes of getting the coding in on time.

Desperate, she had asked the proprietor if there were wifi hotspots nearby. The grease-stained burger-flipper had looked at her like she spoke a foreign language. Her glare now burned at the middle-aged otter's back like a deadly laser. He didn't fall over dead. Instead, he turned up the crackly country station.

I am never leaving the Cities again.

She opened her laptop. Again.

Rescan. No wireless.

Rescan. No wireless.

Rescan. No fucking wireless.

"Damn it... damn it... DAMN IT!" Her fist crashed to the peeling Formica tabletop. She looked around, flushing at her lack of self-control. A serious-faced horse frowned at her from his booth. The greasy-aproned otter scratched himself, staring. The cafe hung empty around her.

Tess buried her face in her paws. This is it. It's over. The last year of my life has been a waste. I'm going to be an intern forever and die with a misspelled temporary name tag. And then my tombstone will be engraved "Jess Hurr" too. Why didn't I just e-mail everything before I left this morning? Because I've gotta be a goddamn perfectionist. Aaahh! I—

"Might I help you, miss?"

She snarled between her paws, not looking up. Some damn bumpkin hitting on me is all I need! "Wrong time, wrong day, cowboy. You'd better keep riding."

"Cowboy?" A pause, like she hadn't been clear enough. "Well, if you say so..." She heard the intruder move off, taking the booth behind her.

Tess chanced a peek through her fingers. Outside, the town hung dark. Everyone had gone to bed. Not even midnight and all the lights were out. The digital clock above the counter glared "11:15 PM" in angry red letters. Her code was due at midnight.

The jackal sat quietly as hope drained from her. Even with her eyes covered, she was still hemmed in by the buzz of cheap florescent lighting, the smell of her cold coffee, the sudden blasting of a Rick Astley song from the booth behind her.

Her taut patience snapped. She spun around to throttle this idiot cowboy back to the 80s. She froze.

The "cowboy" was a golden retriever with a Doctor Who t-shirt, half a granola bar hanging from his mouth, and a look of shock in his haltingly blue eyes. But that wasn't what had made her stop.

He had a laptop.

The laptop had a music video playing.

"Are—Are you on YouTube?" Her mouth hung open.

"Y-yeff." The granola bar moved as he spoke around it. His fingers fumbled to pause the upbeat synth rhythm and affirming lyrics.

"How the hell do you have Internet out here?" Her voice echoed in the empty cafe, drawing another look from the serious farm horse, but she didn't care.

"Ohff!" He smiled proudly, then glanced down, as if confused by the presence of the granola bar hanging from his lips. He snatched it away and turned the ancient laptop to a better angle for her. His tail wagged proudly against the side of the booth. "I have some little weather-proofed repeaters around town. Your machine can't see the network because they're set at five gigahertz. They just bounce the signal back to the house and..."

The retriever clicked play. The deep-voiced ferret resumed dancing the Hustle, his over-large overcoat swaying as he sang through the small speakers.

"Bang! Free access from anywhere in town. A little slow, but..." The canine shrugged and got up to leave, ears tucked back shyly, blue eyes wide.

"You set them to what—? Never mind, there's no time. I need you!" She sat him back down with one paw. "Don't go anywhere!" She dashed out to her car, leaving a stunned retriever in his seat. Her black dress shoes clicked across the street. Her car sat parked outside the repair shop, still unattended to. She dove into her laptop case, pulling a flash drive from one of the fitted pockets. Okay, I just have to put up with this weirdo long enough to use his kludge of a network and save my professional ass.

Shoving her keys back into the pocket of her dress pants, she strode back into the cafe. The otter was still behind the counter, the old horse was still frowning, and the golden retriever was

still sitting in the booth. At least he knows how to "stay."

Tess sat across from him, setting down her laptop. Hers was a black and silver affair, all angles and corners—something she could bring into a meeting without losing all credibility. His was rounded and colored like something from Fisher-Price; various "upgrades" ruined its original contours.

With a few deft keystrokes, she copied the project off her computer and onto the small flash drive. "I need your laptop."

He blinked. "I figured that." He slid it around to face her. "You're welcome."

The jackal tried to right click and failed. "Ahh! You would have a Mac."

His eyes glimmered, a soft swell of laughter escaping his muzzle. "Yeah..."

She ignored him. "Okay... There! It's uploading." All I can do now is wait. She looked up.

The dog gave her a lopsided grin.

With a sigh, she resigned herself to listen to him. What was his name?

Erik? Spelled with a "K"? Very phonetic.

Was he from around here?

Oh? From some other Nowheresville a few counties over, but he's house-sitting for a relative? How interesting!

"Half an hour to upload? What is this? The Dark Ages?"

The golden shrugged. "I'm never in much of a hurry."

Yeah, well some of us are, buddy.

He talked and talked. Tess kept her eyes on the clock and the upload bar, but her dun ears kept tilting back toward him. She'd never been much for pointless prattle. Her co-workers fell blessedly silent whenever she reminded them they

were engineers, not hairstylists. Therefore, she ought to have been annoyed, but found herself shamefully enjoying the situation. No one ever persisted in talking to her this long, this cheerfully.

The upload finished. 11:54 PM.

It's done! I made it in time. Just under the wire. A sudden wild impulse struck her to lean over and kiss the golden square on the lips. But that would be crazy. I barely know him. Probably an axe murderer. Plants wireless repeaters around town. Clearly nuts.

She closed the laptop and slid it back to him, pulling her purse's strap onto her shoulder. He looked up at her, making no effort to hide his sadness at her leaving. What a dog...

Tess hesitated. She was done; no reason to keep him talking, but...

His ears. Silly, floppy ears.

He had such a nice smile.

Golden fur. Soft, silky, like waves.

Those blue, blue eyes...

He grinned and flattened his soft, flaxen ears. "You never told me where you were from."

And without realizing why, the jackal found herself talking. This was odd because Tess Hurr's life was composed of None of Your Damn Business.

1:00 AM rolled around. Still talking.

The cafe closed.

She stood outside, watching in disbelief as that otter locked up and waved goodnight with one webbed paw.

The golden was beside her, regarding her with an amused look.

The hell is he still doing here? She frowned, ears back. "What's that look for?"

He smiled at her. "Never had a cafe close?"

"Never knew they closed."

He shifted, pulling on his lightweight jacket, concern entering his eyes. "You gonna be all right?"

Examining the gloomy street, she crossed her arms. "Well, there aren't any hotels here. I guess I can go back to the garage. Sleep in the lobby."

He pointed across the street. "You mean that?" He pointed across the street at the locked, dark, and obviously closed garage.

"Umm..." Embarrassment surfaced, but anger shoved it back down. "Well, what in the hell should I do?"

"Well..." The dog glanced away, pawpads rubbing the back of his neck. "I guess you could um... crash at my place." The statement sounded more and more like a question as his shy eyes met hers.

Tess saw his expression and realized she was glaring.

He lifted his paws in conciliation. "I swear to dog, there is a couch!"

The scavenger in her genes looked him up and down. He had maybe an inch on her and perhaps thirty pounds. If he got creepy, she could always kill him. Her aikido teachers had been fond of making her play attacker. She found it secretly satisfying when they sent this scrawny jackal up to play sacrificial lamb to some visiting sensei. She'd inevitably be thrown to the padded mats, but once in a while, she even managed to land a blow. It always felt good.

Really, what did she have to fear? She'd lived alone since she was nineteen; she'd walked home in the dark; this cowtown casanova didn't intimidate her. The golden wasn't in bad shape: a little pudgy around the middle, but he clearly got exercise. Carried himself like a mugger magnet, however.

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"No reason." Clearly nuts. She shivered again.

He noticed, concern touching his blue, blue eyes.

Her pride shrugged it off. "I get cold easily."

"Despite all that hot blood?"

A laugh whip-cracked in her throat. It sounded unfamiliar. "I'm just that kind of girl."

He slipped his coat off and held it open.

She raised a paw. "I couldn't." Who are you trying to impress, buddy?

"You could." His blue eyes caught the lamplight. "Come on. I'm just that kind of guy."

She let the dog drape the coat over her. Large and still warm from his body. His scent lingered in it. Sweat and deodorant. Both very male. She started to relax, to enjoy the warmth, the scents, then caught herself. What are you doing? You barely know this guy. Axe murderer, remember? Her throat cleared, but the scent remained. "I'm... I'm sorry if I was a bitch to you."

"It's all right." The golden managed to make an eye-roll reassuring. "You seem fine now."

Warmth filled her face, but the night was dark and her fur was thick. She kept her voice even. "Yeah well, you know how we jackals are."

Gravel crunched under his bare paws as he looked down from the stars. "I don't, actually."

The house hung gray in the night air; single level, built perhaps twenty years ago. Erik grinned self-assuredly, flourished the keys from his jeans pocket, but dropped them clumsily when she smiled. She almost giggled, but stifled it in the cuff of her borrowed coat.

He unlocked the door in a far more practical fashion and held it open for her. She stepped inside. Light pooled through the windows, illuminating thick white carpet and dark wooden furniture. Antique cabinet, family photos, pointless ceramic knick-knacks: these made up the modest living room. An old lady lived

here all right, or this kid could sure decorate like one. Tess's ears slowly rose as she turned to look at him.

Silent, she watched the moonlight dance over his pelt. The sleek fur of his neck gleamed, golden color blending to silver in the pure white light. That slight ruffle of pelt right at the collar of his shirt, so soft looking. Tess touched the coarse fur of her own throat, aware of the dusty matte color to which no shampoo could ever bring a sheen.

Her heart beat a little faster. She felt exhausted, exhilarated. She had gotten the project in on time. Come on. You've never lost control over a pair of pretty ears before. Are you going to start now? You're just tired. Get some sleep. In the morning, he'll be just another silky-eared moron.

The retriever closed the door and paused, ears perking, then glanced over his shoulder. Pretty blue eyes met hers and a smile quirked his lips. "Bedroom's down that way. Sheets are in the closet. If you find yourself sleeping in the bathtub, you took a wrong turn."

Her paw dropped to her side. Cynicism boiled around her words. "Didn't think I'd figure that one out?"

He shrugged in sleepy serenity. "Ya did have a long day. I'll be on the couch I didn't lie about."

Tess stood for a moment in the entryway of a strange house with a stranger dog. He caught her watching again. She challenged him with her eyes.

He pulled the blanket off the sofa like a mator's cape, then bowed and spoke theatrically: "I bid you sleep well this dun even, madam." He straightened from his bow and proceeded to flop backward onto the couch.

The jackal turned away in disgust, struggling hard not to smile.

Tess laid in bed, the day running through her mind like a surreal art film. Seething at the breakdown. Cursing at the tow truck driver.

Glaring at the cafe owner. And a strange, goofy golden.

What's this guy's angle? She curled up in the blankets, blankets warm and heavy with his scent. Just like the coat, now hanging on a chair by her purse. Her eyes made a quick survey of the room, inventorying it for things to bludgeon him with if she woke up and he was there.

She fell into a twitchy jackal sleep.

CO.SA

Breakfast was cereal, orange juice, and toast. Like her car. Toast.

The jackal's phone rang. Garage calling back.

Had they fixed her car?

Oh? They'd have to ship in a timing belt? Grand.

The cell phone creaked in Tess's paw, the plastic case exceeding its structural limits. When would the car be done?

Two days?

Her blood seared through her veins. "Will that be okay? OKAY?"

Erik's spoonful of Frosted Flakes froze halfway to his mouth.

She sighed. "Yes. That will be fine. Yes. You have a nice day too."

He wiped the milk from his chin and smiled.

Paws on her hips, she leveled her muzzle on him. "What are you smiling at—?"

Her phone rang again. The corporate techs had found what?

The district supervisor explained the situation: it was dire, but she could fix this. Dammit! They'd found a critical problem in the final integration tests, not her fault, but if she couldn't fix it by the close of business, the account was toast. Like her car. Like she would be.

Tess sat down hard on the sofa with her laptop. Dammit!

Erik munched on his cereal.

She logged onto the company server.

He cleared the table.

She downloaded the error reports.

He tinkered with electronics at the kitchen table.

Fortunately, his aunt had a more conventional wireless LAN, so logging in here was simple. Neither one said much about how she stuck around to use his Internet connection. A simple matter of logistics: she couldn't get anywhere else in time. She needed him. Again.

The morning passed.

She got a headache.

He clattered about the kitchen.

From the corner of her eye, she caught him looking her way. He stared wistfully until smoke plumed up from the pan.

The fire alarm wailed.

The golden yelped in shock, ears flattening in an instant. "Sorry! Sorry! That was just me!" He hauled a chair over, clamored on top of it, and tried to turn the blaring device off. Despite the noise, her ears cupped forward in interest. After a few failed tries, he pulled out the battery. The screeching dropped off.

Hopping down from the chair, he glanced to her, head ducked, tail tucked. "Sorry. The house isn't on fire. That was totally me."

Amusement tickled her hackles. "I know."

He switched the nine-volt from paw to paw, as if unsure what to do with it. He retreated to the stove.

Minutes later, she looked up from the grilled cheese sandwiches he placed next to her. The burnt part had been scraped away with clumsy

effort, but it looked edible compared to most things she ate on the road. Why is he being so nice? He isn't even hitting on me. Is he... gay? She almost started a conversation, but he seemed to be having a very meaningful experience trying not to get melted cheese in his muzzle fur. Not that she had time to watch. Something hung in the air, prickling the jackal's hide.

C95

Earlier that morning, Erik had walked in the bathroom door, startling her. She had brandished a toothbrush in his direction, having grabbed it instead of the pepper spray from her bag. He wagged. She relaxed.

"Damn. I forgot toothpaste."

"You can use mine. I don't mind."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, that's hygienic! Why don't we just make out?"

They finished brushing their teeth without acknowledging they were blushing.

C .

Dammit, girl, stop daydreaming about useless things!

Tess told the techs which bugs had priority.

Erik washed the dishes.

She demanded updates from her slower co-workers.

He painted a tiny plastic figurine, pink tongue poking out in concentration.

He plays Dungeons & Dragons. Fucking nerd. "So this is your aunt's house huh? Never left town, buddy? Never felt that wanderlust? Just lived... here, all your life?"

The golden's steady paws began painting stars on the wizard's purple robe. He could have been a doctor with a grip that even, rather than... whatever he was. Those blue eyes stayed locked on the model as he spoke. "Actually, I've been to

every state but Hawaii. The travelin' itch runs in my family pretty deep."

"Why...?"

"My parents liked to travel casually. I just took it a step further."

"No. Why are you here? In this town?"

He shrugged. "My aunt needed someone to house-sit. And because there are no cockroaches."

"In the house?"

"In the state."

A barked laugh. "Not even cockroaches could be enticed to come here, huh?"

"Nope." He smiled up at her, wagging once against the easy chair, eyes off his project for just an instant. He smudged one of the stars. "Just pretty jackals."

She scowled back down at her laptop, finding important things to do.

At 5:49 PM, the jackal looked up to growl at him. He was no fuss, no bother, but something about him, about this place distracted her. Probably bodies in the freezer. I'll check if this version ever fucking compiles!

The mantle held old photos. One caught her eye. A big grin on a little puppy Erik. Same goofy smile. Same blue eyes. Same flaxen ears. Only five-hundred times cuter.

The dog sat in the recliner, one paw behind his head, the other trying to scratch his nose while still holding a book at a readable angle. His ears twitched when he got to the exciting parts. He's still pretty cute.

Her jaw clenched and she forced herself to return to her work. Infuriating! He just keeps... But that was just it. He wasn't doing anything. Why did she keep feeling like lashing out? He wasn't trying to hit on her. He wasn't being a creep. He acted like he had no agenda at all beyond helping her out. And he didn't seem to

be staring at her chest. At least, not that she'd noticed.

By the time the software patch was done and confirmed with Corporate, the sun was going down. She watched the retriever screw the case back on the DVD player he'd been cleaning, humming some tune she swore she'd heard before. Almost twenty-four hours she'd known this guy and she'd still failed to make an assessment. Hunky farmboy? No; he didn't seem to own non-snarky t-shirts. Waggish nerd? No; she couldn't say he'd been awkward around her. Backwoods axe murderer? Probably not; his eyes held distracted wonder, rather than detached malice. What is he?

Satisfied with his work, the golden plugged the player back in and sat down on the couch, a respectful distance from her. Turning, as if feeling her gaze, the dog looked over with concern and... something else...

She crossed her arms. "Okay, buddy, fess up. Why are you helping me out like this?"

He cocked his ears and looked at her in mild confusion. "It wasn't like I could just walk on by and leave ya sittin' there, could I?"

"Yes, Erik! That is what normal people do! They see things and they go on with their lives."

He smiled. "Seemed the decent thing to do."

How dare he be so... nice? It's infuriating! "Decent is holding the elevator door or not spitting your gum in the water fountain. Why are you doing all this for me?"

"Look, if this is about making you take the last piece of pizza, it wasn't Midwestern hospitality. I really don't like olives."

Tess glared.

The golden retriever sighed, closing his pretty eyes for a moment in thought. He shrugged. "You seem nice."

"Nice, Erik?"

The tow truck driver had arrived, given her car one look, and spit. "Yep. Car's broke all right."

"Broke? Is that your professional opinion, or could you, you know, actually look at it?"

The wolf had straightened his worn baseball cap, emblazoned Strauss Transmission Repair, and shrugged. He walked a few yards back down the road, then bent to pick something up. The something was black, rubbery, and sheared off at the ends. "This... is your timing belt." He tilted the snapped belt toward her, annunciating: "Brr. Oke. And we ain't talking Vivaldi."

"Okay, how about you do your job, and I'll go do mine, huh?"

He shrugged and began hooking up the tow truck.

Barely contained fury crackled like electricity over her muzzle as she snatched her laptop from the car, slinging it to her hip like a holster. Teeth clenched so hard her bones creaked, she forced a deadly sweet smile, and then spun around before she did something illegal.

(C.S.)

Her mind returned to the present. She winced at the bite of her own words. Okay, I went a little overboard there. "I yell at half the people in your Podunk town and you think I'm nice?"

He nodded, as confident as when she'd asked his name.

"Why?"

He tilted his head again, thinking, mouth hanging open, tongue on the verge of a loll. "Hmm... I guess it was your eyes. I saw you through the diner window. Lost puppy eyes, ya might say." He grinned like a fool, like he'd found something obvious. "I couldn't just do nothing."

Smothering the flare of anger at the 'puppy eyes' comment, she collapsed against the couch. Crazy golden. Erik seemed to interpret this as a sign he had explained the matter sufficiently. He nodded, thought again for a moment, then

scratched himself eagerly under the muzzle until he slouched, satisfied.

Tess knew she was fried, burnt out mentally and physically. She'd worked hard for every scrap of comfort that she'd ever known and had learned that free offers seldom came cheap. She wasn't keen on accepting charity, but she had to in this case. And he was so kind, so sweet...

The situation crashed over her in a wave. A sort of *déjà vu*, though the moment was novel.

When she was growing up, Dad never raised a hand to her. Almost worse, he scarcely acknowledged her. She'd burned for every instant of his approval. Though she would punch anyone else in the mouth for saying it, Mom had been a trophy wife. She had hobbies instead of a job and her career seemed to consist of looking pretty for people she didn't really like. Dad... Well, she could never really say. He spent more time at work than he did at home. The few times she remembered with him consisted of him interacting with her awkwardly, as if she were someone else's kid.

When boyfriends gave her any excuse not to trust them, she pounced, testing them. But it hadn't really been testing, more like grinding them down, pushing them away until they left. As the romances fell apart, she just growled and pressed on. It only proved her right; everyone was going to screw you over in one way or another. Every boyfriend who had 'failed' had been just another log on that great sweltering hellfire of her indignation. It warmed her soul; it kept her alive.

And when interest glimmered in her friends' eyes, she'd test them too. Inevitably, she chased them off just as quickly. Served them right, after all. They were just upset she'd caught them hunting for jackal pelt. Fuck it, she didn't need them.

In the end, she would end up either by herself or in the process of getting there.

But something about this goofball golden retriever had affected her. Tess Hurr never stalled, never froze up, yet in this moment she could do nothing but look at him. Hindpaws on the coffee table, eyes on the ceiling, he sat unaware. He

was every Prince Charming she'd swooned over as a pup, every chick-flick heartthrob she'd ever wanted to punch in the chiseled muzzle for not existing, every pillow she'd awoken spooning with on those empty nights. He was every man she had never met.

Erik noticed her shiver. Without a pause, he took the blanket from his lap and gently covered her with it. She fought the sudden emotions that washed through her, battling back tears. No one had ever seen her cry, not in her entire adult life.

He, unaware of her emotional event horizon, offered a kind smile and sat back down.

She leaned in toward him. He froze.

The jackal kissed him. Lightly, gently. Right on the cheek.

He looked shocked.

Shit, he was gay after all! Tess stumbled for apologies.

Then the golden's ears went up. He wagged, and the goofiest, happiest smile crept across his gold muzzle like the dawning sun. He shifted a little and she leaned cautiously against him, testing the waters, the blanket pressed between them. Her head came to rest on his shoulder. Soft fur mingled with her own. A sudden urge crept up in her to share the blanket with him, to feel more of that fur. She opened up, letting him in, all just to feel more of that softness, to make sure it was real. It was. Paws and muzzles found perfect places to nestle against. Cuddles ensued. Odd, because Tess Hurr never cuddled.

It felt nice.

He felt nice.

His paw slipped around her back...

And this is when he grabs my ass.

It settled on her hip. The golden sighed against her, breathing deeper than she ever thought possible.

She put her paws to his chest, feeling the texture of his fur under her pawpads. His t-shirt moved as he breathed. She felt a heartbeat. His. Or maybe just her own. She'd never really been aware of anything positive from it before.

He looked down.

She looked up.

For once, he had something other than a goofy dog grin on his muzzle.

He had a look of... something else. Something warm. Something she'd never seen before, except in those sappy movies she detested.

She moved up his body and kissed him on the lips. Slow and tender. Not hurried like before.

He kissed back. No tricks. No tongue. Just squeezing her body a little more tightly, as if he wanted to know she was real too and not just a stray wisp of dream.

The kiss ended.

He looked at her. Ears folded so cute. Lips rubbing together a bit, as if committing the feel of her kiss to memory.

The retriever pulled her close; and, instead of launching into another kiss, he gently... rubbed... muzzles. His stocky, soft-furred retriever muzzle brushed through her coarser coat. No hurry. His strong, gentle arms held her. No pressure. No move for this to go any further, just giving her warmth.

The jackal found herself feeling giddy, wanting to giggle, but that was crazy. Tess Hurr did not giggle. He chuckled softly and she realized it was too late. Jackal giggles had occurred.

She moved under the blanket, closer, her arms moving over him, fitting to his body. Through the shifting, the nuzzles turned to a soft bump of nosepads. Almost accidentally, they kissed.

She slipped back, almost shy. She blushed as he smiled like he'd known her forever, known that she was in fact very shy under all that bravado.

His paws caressed her back. Her eyes closed.

Peace.

Peace was what she felt with him.

Peace for her fiery jackal heart.

She'd never really felt that before.

She slipped gently over him.

He accepted this, accepted her completely and happily.

And then there were soft puppy smooches.

Warm under-blanket cuddles.

Paws exploring so gently up her back and down his sides.

She thought: This is crazy... Do you really think you have a future in this flyspot of a town? Or with this grinning fool? She tensed, fighting back the voice. No. I want this. Reality and I can work things out later.

She pulled him tighter, down onto her as she reclined. He followed, settling over her as they laid down together on the couch, still kissing so softly. Lips just barely pressing together, each savoring the feel of the other's kiss.

"Ohh..." The jackal ran her paws along his back and buried her face in his shoulder, wiping tears secretly in his fur.

His paws caressed her sides, exploring her. Tracing the lines of her body through the pressed button-up shirt.

"Erik?" She kissed him again, then twice more. "Erik."

He looked down at her with concerned eyes.

"I hate to be a typical girl..." Her muzzle tipped down, ears tipping back, and searched for truth in his face. "But what are you thinking right now?"

Shy for a moment, he rolled the question around in his mind. He glanced into her eyes and she watched the kitchen lights trace subtle shining arcs in his blue eyes. His lips spread as if to speak, but he only smiled.

The jackal shifted, ears flattening. "What?"

He shrugged, wiggling self-consciously over her. "I mostly thought: 'Wow... She really likes me. And I didn't even do anything special.'"

The dusky-furred canine smiled. "Anything else?"

"I was thinking maybe all that hot blood isn't so bad after all." He blushed.

She flushed lightly and her paws found his cheeks. "You are unbelievably sweet. And a gigantic dork."

"Yeah, ya caught me." He kissed her.

Her paws ran through his head fur. Her legs shifted to lay under his. Her nose bathed in his scent. She wanted nothing else in that moment but to hold him, to kiss him more and more.

Lick. Lick. Gentle licks on her lips. She moaned, opening her mouth with delicate slowness. His lips slid against hers as she licked back up at him, finding the smooth warmth of his tongue.

Every kiss of her life had been the least she could get away with: stepping stones that lead to destinations social or sexual. But when she kissed him, kissing was the point. His lips traced along hers, his muzzle sinking down to fit with hers. Their tongues danced and dove; she shifted under him, reveling in the weight of his body on hers, in his arms around her, his paws sliding to the back of her head to stroke her ears. No one ever touched her ears, save for that short period after she had been taught not to bite and before her parents' friends had stopped calling her 'pup.'

Her paws crept to the bottom of his shirt. Eager to feel every inch of him, she began to explore under it. He moaned as she caressed his back, arching against her. He broke the kiss, but his hips pressed to hers. Her head rocked back and

forth, and she drew in a sharp breath as she felt it for the first time. A delicious firmness nudging between her legs. She had this sweet country puppy all hot and bothered. Nope. Definitely not gay. Her clawed toes curled against the couch cushions, legs spreading to give him better access to her most private areas.

She slid his shirt up and, after a few seconds of raining kisses down on her, he got the idea. He sat up just a little to help her pull off his shirt. Some brief trouble getting it past his muzzle; he had discovered a fondness for kissing the soft curve of her neck. She dropped his t-shirt to the floor and looked up at him. Her paws traced his stomach, a little soft but nice, and gave a massaging squeeze to his pecs. He inhaled, savoring her tender attentions. "Mmmm..."

Dog paws rested on her taut tummy. The golden seemed lost in her touch. She gave a little grind with her hips to get his attention, sighing at the rush of arousal she felt pushing against the wonderful hardness in his jeans. He pressed back, the heat of his erection fueling her desire. They began grinding together in little circles, paws slipping along each other's bodies in growing arousal. She could smell it on him, the deeper, sharper underlay to his warm male scent, like the counter melody to a symphony.

She took his paws from where they had been tracing her arms, guiding them to the buttons of her shirt. He undid them, though with fingers less steady than those that had been repairing electronics scant hours previous. His breathing quickened and he carefully edged his paws inside her open blouse. He nuzzled down her muzzle, sneaking in a few quick kisses on her cheek. She giggled.

His paws swept under her back, causing her to arch underneath him. Their hips moved in firmer and firmer motion until they thrust together outright. In the dim light, she buried her fingers in the soft shimmer of his fur. His erection bumped against her, pressing the damp fabric of her panties against her slick lips. She felt her muscles contract in shivering anticipation. I want him. The certainty of the thought echoed in her mind, but she felt at ease with it.

Unsteady paws traced the strap of her bra, slipping under it to smooth the fur beneath, ruffled by their increasingly sensual cuddles. His humps slowed to steady pressure as he explored her body. She spread her legs around him, tucking her hindpaws behind his knees.

Her bra felt a little tight now, with him fiddling around under the strap like that, probably looking for the clasp. She took his paw in hers again and unsnapped the bra's front clasp with his blunt claw. His ears cocked, a little surprised, looking unsure for an instant what to do.

The jackal laughed softly, teasing tongue tip slipping against her lips. "Want me to find the instruction manual?"

His smile was a little nervous. "Think I'll figure it out from here."

"Oh? Oh!"

He lapped at her moderate breasts, squeezing, caressing. Tess had a runner's body and she didn't attract the attention her chestier friends did. Erik seemed to be attracted just fine. The rough texture of his pawpads grazed her nipples, summoning a gasp from deep in her body. She glanced at his face. The golden's ears were perked, and, though he blushed, his mouth held a panting smile, like he was having the time of his life.

She sat up. He slid one paw up her neck to hold the side of her face as he met his muzzle to hers. Wet, soft kisses flowed from his lips. Along her muzzle, down her throat, between her breasts, down her stomach and stopping at the top of her pants. His paws slid around her waistband to undo the clip of her belt, fumbling a bit. He rubbed the heel of his paw against her crotch, making her moan. Her paws gripped his shoulders. He unzipped her fly and worked the pinstriped fabric down and over her legs.

A spike of shyness coursed through her. These were her plainest panties. At least they were black, hiding the wetness she felt. His paws stroked her hips, her own settled on his soft ears. His gold-furred muzzle sank down between her dusky thighs. The retriever breathed

her scent, eyes closing hazily for a moment. He looked up shyly.

"What a nice little lapdog."

"Lapdog? I'll show you some lapping!" The golden dove between her legs.

"What are you—? Eek!" One paw covered her laughter as the other pressed his licking muzzle against her.

A few sloppy chomps and nuzzles before he managed to catch the bottom of her panties in his teeth. She squeaked and shivered, arousal simmering deep within her. He dragged the panties down her legs, blue eyes widening at the sight of her bare crotch.

Her voice came out in a bedroom growl: "Bad doggy."

Kneeling back beside the coffee table, he lifted his paws to his chest. He tilted his head in pride, her panties dangling from his teeth.

Naked now save for the open blouse, she prowled toward him, onto the carpet, curling one paw in the thick fur of his chest and the other around slipping down to the waist of his jeans. "You play nice."

He tilted his head, ears flopping. The panties dropped from his mouth as she felt along his pants and gripped his cock. He shivered. "Ohhh..."

"Oh?" She squeezed him harder. "Doggy likes?"

The doggy wiggled, breathing hard. "Yeah..."

"Mmmm..." She undid the fly of his jeans, gripping him through the thin fabric of his undershorts. Ooh, silk boxers? The surprises just never stop with this guy. "What do you like, doggy? Like where I'm petting you?"

Erik whimpered, eyes shut and trembling. "I like you."

She froze.

His eyes opened and he regarded her after a single glance down. Lopsided smile and messy head fur. He gave a little shrug.

"Oh Erik..." She hugged the shirtless golden. Her bare chest pressed to his, their fur intermingling. Her head felt so safe tucked over his shoulder. One paw slipped up and she brushed the mist from her eyes.

He held her, his arms close around her. She should have been scared. Being held by a strange boy, basically naked, but a strange warmth welled up inside her. For whatever reason, this golden was the real thing. He wasn't going to do anything to her. At least, not anything she didn't want. She shifted against him, moaning through her teeth as the silk-covered dog cock pressed through her stomach fur.

Giant damn erection and the boy settles for a hug. "What am I going to do with you?"

He laughed softly and shrugged. His wide paws spread across her back. His lips found her shoulder and kissed it with unrushed tenderness.

She pressed her muzzle to his ear, whispering: "I'm gonna fuck you till your ears run straight."

The retriever gasped, a blush running under his fur. Her paws pressed his chest down till he laid on the carpet. The jackal pulled off his remaining clothes. They landed, inside out, on the kitchen floor. She climbed over him and took in the sights.

He watched her, a little shy, tongue lolled in a quiet pant.

The fur ran lighter on his sac and sheath, almost cream in color. The tip of his cock poked from its hiding place, dark and slick in the dim light. He was gently oozing already, she could see where it darkened the fur here and there. Nice full sheath, a bulge at the base. She'd have to move fast or his knot could get stuck there.

She pulled his sheath back. He shifted, one paw closing over her knee. The sheath pulled further and further back and he whimpered harder and harder as she exposed his smooth length. She slowed down a little as she met resistance, but pressed on. He gave a little grunt as it slid behind his knot. He wasn't huge, but he was gorgeous; Mother Nature knew what the hell she was doing.

Tess climbed over his body, pulling off her unbuttoned shirt as she straddled his hips. She took his stout muzzle in her paws. He leaned up to kiss her,



but she was ready: she opened her mouth and closed her lips over the front of his muzzle. Her tongue raced back and forth across his lips and he writhed under her in shock and pleasure, his shaft jerking up slightly in reflex. She released his muzzle and pressed down onto his straining erection. Her right paw slid down, feeling the wetness at the tip of his cock and across the surface of her vagina, getting the two acquainted.

"Uhhhh... Oohh!"

"Stay boy." Her paw lifted him a bit, then she slid down onto his waiting shaft. "MmmmMM-Mmm.... Good boy!" She rocked back and forth, getting used to the golden's delightful presence inside her. Down, down his shaft, right down to the knot. The hot bulge pressed against her lips. She moaned. Her pawpads gripped his chestfur again and rolled to pull him on top of her. "All right, cowboy. Time to ride."

"C—OooOOoh! Hmmm-huh!" Above her now, he shuddered, then smiled unsteadily. "C-cowboy?"

Her muscled legs pressed him down into her.

His blue eyes widened; he gasped.

Tess gave him her best sultry look, tracing a finger up his muzzle. "Giddy-up..."

The dog's cock slid wetly into her as he whimpered. The jackal bit her lip, pressing him closer. He began thrusting into her, eyes closing as he worked into a steady rhythm. Pleasure tingled through her body, racing down her nerves with every thrust into her. She clutched at his back, blunt claws running furrowed through his golden fur. She mixed some desperation into her tone: "Faster... faster!"

With a groan and a squeeze of his arms, he sped up, jostling her body with every thrust.

She bucked her hips hard at him. Her moans filled the quiet living room. Her shoulders slid against the carpet as she writhed under his body. "Ooohh... Fu-uck me! Fuck me h-hard!"

He breathed a little harder and began slamming into her, his knot squishing at the wetness of her vagina. His head tucked down against hers, she could hear him panting



through his teeth, hot breath stirring the fur of her cheek.

Tess clutched his bare back as he rode her. "Yes! YES! Like that! OOOOHH!" Her arms thrashed back, rocking her body under him. She moaned loudly. Boys liked that.

He stopped.

The jackal's eyes opened. She whimpered up at him.

His face was over hers, almost nose to nose. He shook his head softly. He cradled her muzzle in one paw, tilting it to his. His other paw slipped down her arm, smoothing her coarse fur, and gently took her paw. His lips sank slowly to hers, delivering a kiss, simple and tender.

The kiss lingered on. Her tongue darted out, but found no response, save the gentle squeeze of his paw in hers. What is with this boy...? Her free paw found its way to his side, all further thought getting lost in the soft press of his lips, the filling presence of his hard length inside her, the paw cupping her chin. Her world narrowed the boy in her arms, to all the ways he was touching her, all the ways no one had bothered to touch her.

The kisses ended with a soft sound and his blue eyes opened, as if wondering if she understood.

She nodded.

He watched her with a breathless, slightly oblivious smile, as if she were the entirety of his world. Then he slipped out of her by mistake, looked embarrassed, and had to reposition himself with one paw, since the other still held to hers. Her previous forays into sex had never been anything like this. When she let a guy catch her, she took him hard, rough, and fast—every move a desperate attempt to wring some feeling out of the encounter.

Erik worked his stiff canine shaft deep into her, a little shy to look her in the eyes. Thrusts beginning anew. The paw that had repositioned his erection slipped to the side of her face, stroking through her fur with every unhurried thrust,

covered in his scent. She felt him pushing up inside her passage, her body responding with eager, slippery squeezes. Her paw still rested on his side, feeling him breathe. The room hung quiet, the only sounds soft gasps and gentle wet noises as he penetrated her.

She gripped his paw, then felt her breath catch as he thrust just a bit harder. Her vaginal muscles clenched at his cock sliding in and out in steady strokes, each thrust sliding along her walls in exquisite tension. Panting, she held his paw even tighter, whining in pleasure as his body moved a little faster over hers, knot squishing against her opening, pressing a little ways inside each time. His tip pulsed softly along her sensitive flesh, added more fluids to the mix.

Tess shifted her hips under each thrust, angling to take him deeper, getting him to hit every surface inside her. The dog's mouth hung open, soft tongue lolled to the side, swaying with every thrust. His eyes were closed, his ears were back. He pressed down atop her, the fur of their chests the same pale blond, as if intended to match. Another soft rush of her fluids spread over his thrusting cock. He moaned, shuddering visibly.

The jackal's breath came faster now, her body gripping him tighter, both inside and out. Panting, moaning, she rocked harder against his hips. Even in the dim light, she spied the grin on his muzzle as he sped up to try matching her. He worked swiftly in and out of her sex, tight and hot and tingling tender, fluids leaking warmly down her thighs to collect in the fur of her tail. They were a little off-sync, but it felt wonderful.

The golden's knot battered against her tender lips, matting down her damp fur. Her breasts bouncing lightly as her legs began to buck harder and faster; her hips lifting up desperately to meet him. Ecstasy rolled through her body like a roar of flame. Her back arched as she pressed him close. Her rapid panting turned to a long, delicate moan as her passage clenched along his shaft, their combined juices pulsing down to soak his sac and sheath. Pressing his hand to her chest, her only thought arose as an urgent whisper: "Eriiiiik!"

Her body bucked, legs seizing around his waist, back lifted off the floor.

Her teeth grit.

Her very being shivered.

Bliss overtook her.

He pulled her up and pulled her close, grinding his knot against the top of her slit and never, never letting go of her paw. Her head tipped back as pleasure seared through her body, breath gasping in time with the contracting rhythm of her vaginal muscles around him. His strong arms held her to him; a world's worth of tenderness in his unsteady paws. Sitting up now, she shivered against him.

Her head pressed against his shoulder, impossibly real. Guys like him didn't exist. But here he was, holding her with the aftershocks of orgasm rumbling along her body as she straddled his kneeling form. In those fragile moments while her breath returned to her, the jackal didn't have anything to fight, anything to struggle against, just a soft caring golden retriever buried deep inside her, giving her a feeling of fullness she had neither words for nor experience with.

Tess traced the pads of her paws along his thick muzzle. His lips, soft as a dream's edge, curled in a smile as she touched them. His blue eyes found hers. She smiled, heart racing her every pant. She knew she didn't love him; she knew also that she could. That knowledge should have scared her, but nothing seemed frightening when she was with this strange, sweet golden.

Breathing her scent as his paw stirred the black fur of her back, he smiled unsteadily at her. She smiled back. He laid her back down with infinite care, making sure her head didn't reach the floor without his paw intervening to soften the landing. He nestled deeper between her legs, setting off a series of soft whimpers from the tender, wet jackal.

A flicker of thought crossed his face and he swept a pillow off the sofa. Her ears cocked at him, brain still a little fuzzy. He bumped the throw pillow against her side and lifted his

muzzle slightly. She raised her hips, whining as he slipped from her again. He grimaced a little at the loss of contact, but succeeded in tucking the pillow under her rump. Settling back down on it, she held his paw in both of hers, a soft blush touching her cheeks.

The golden leaned in and kissed her on the nose. Her ears drooped, so relaxed they felt as folded as his. He missed once, whimpering as he brushed her thigh instead, then guided his shaft back to her entrance, sliding it across the slick warmth there as he looked down at her with sunny retriever devotion in the dark night.

She squeezed his paw. He entered her. Both gasped.

The kitchen's light shimmered off his back. Erik was a pup with a purpose, bumping and stroking into the jackal clutching his paw. Her tail swept between his legs, curling up to feel his sac swing across it, wet fur sticking in moments of fleeting friction. He moved faster, harder as she moaned and shivered under him. Breath came in gasps and growls. They panted. They moaned.

Erik's eyes closed. Unwilling to release his paw, Tess licked up at his chin. He licked back, following her muzzle back down for a fiery kiss. Their tongues swirled and darted together, exploring the soft ridges on the roof of his mouth, so like those of her own, but more pronounced and saturated with his taste. The jackal lapped inside his mouth, desperate for his taste as he made love to her. She wanted every part of him; she wanted this feeling; she wanted him for the rest of her days.

He opened his mouth to gasp, affording her even greater access. His hips shivered. His thrusts came harder, sacrificing rhythm for speed. He whined as her long tongue sought out every surface inside his muzzle. Her muscles clenched hard around the delightful intruder. He whimpered, floppy ears trembling, rocking with every needful thrust. This cowboy wasn't long for the trail.

The dog's knot ground against her, his cock pressing deep as it could reach inside her. His

muzzle slipped from hers with a slurp along her tongue.

A gasp.

A squeeze on her paw.

An intimate, vulnerable smile.

His length twitched, accompanied by the first blast of his semen against her walls. Her paws slid back on the carpet, her knees pressing in behind the small of his back. The golden retriever spurted again, movement traveling up his shaft again and again as he coated the inside of her vagina in thick, heavy sperm. Beneath him, the jackal pressed her hips upward, back curved, desperate to capture every spurt of his canine seed. Paws slipped for purchase against carpet, underlaying the intonations of combined pleasure.

Whimper, whine, and howl: these composed the ancient language of pleasure he invoked over her. His body shook, hips grinding between her legs. His muzzle dipped as his orgasm deepened, blue eyes closing after one more trembling look at her. Her jackal heart fluttered. Boys never looked at her like that. Nobody did. Not even chick flick heartthrobs.

The pulses of semen ebbed. Erik's balls jerked over her tail, mental eagerness outlasting mortal ejaculate. He panted deeply, tongue hanging wet with saliva not his own. She pulled his paw against her, leading him down atop her. His body trembled over her. Between gasped breaths he spoke her name, not a hollow rote in the religion of pleasure, but the sum lexicon of a language it seemed he'd forsake his native tongue to learn.

His native tongue also drooled a little on her chest, but she forgave it. Sleep lurked nearby, but she ignored it for the time being, savoring instead the sweet heaviness of his body on hers. Good boy...

◀ ◻ ▶

Tess awoke with a jump, disoriented. Unfamiliar sheets and an increasingly familiar scent

greeted her. Morning light traced warm shining shapes on her body. She moaned. Did I just dream about having the hottest sex ever with a guy from the Apple Store's Genius Bar?

A clumsy clattering. He was in the kitchen. A soft smile met her muzzle.

The jackal shifted her legs, feeling a delicious tenderness as her naked lips rubbed together between them. Nope! Definitely not a dream. Her paws ran down her bare shoulders. Her gaze swept through the subtle shades of morning. She whined softly at his absence from the room in general and from the bed in particular. His scent lingered in her fur; she buried her nose in it and giggled like a little girl who'd never tried on perfume before.

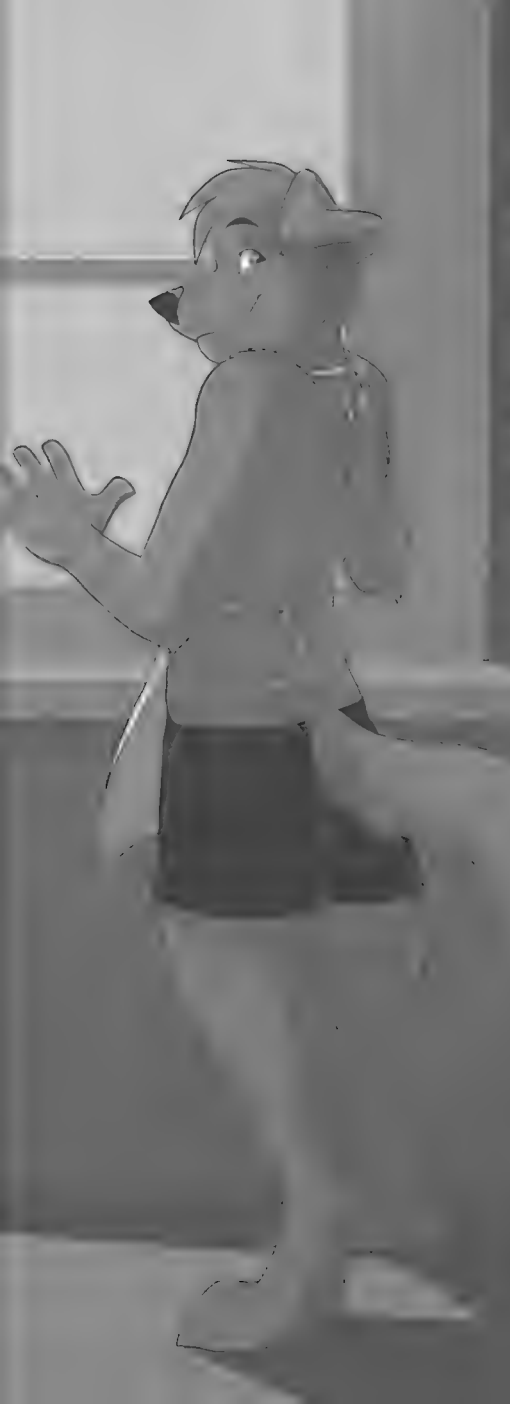
In the back of her mind, a sliver of anger burned. Why am I this happy about a boy? He's just a boy... even if he does smell really nice. She closed her eyes and his goofy, nervous grin formed from the mist in her mind. Dammit. What's wrong with me? I don't have a plan. Her pawpads toyed with the pillowcase. Life hummed though her chest. I've planned everything up to this point and where has it gotten me? Just this once, I'll make the plan afterward.

The jackal looked up. Her clothes hung on the chair. She hopped into them. If the world of romantic comedies had collided with reality to the point that Erik had climbed aboard, any of the other clichés could have escaped with him. His parents, or half the goldens in the country, were probably in the living room, waiting to drop their coffees in shock as a messy-furred jackal strode out in a state of scandalous undress.

Prowling down the hall, she caught sight of him in the kitchen. Alone. Silk boxers and an apron. Auntie Meredith hadn't returned early after all. Tess bounded into the room, took him by the shoulders, and licked him behind the ear.

He scrambled the eggs halfway out of the pan. "Hi there!"

"Hi." His fur was soft against her nose.



"Sleep well?"

Her arms draped down his body as she rubbed her face into his neck. She kissed his cheek.

The tomorrow's outfit slowly took on form. "Hm, well, huh?"

"Mmmhmm." One paw slipped into that apron, reaching through the folds of his shirt. "So that's the kind of boy you are; you'd leave a girl alone and cold in your bed?"

He cocked an ear, his voice rumbling. "I was going to bring you breakfast."

She chuckled against the nape of his neck. "I'm not in the mood for eggs."

"Oh?" His ears dropped, as his voice made clear his heart had followed suit. "What are you hungry for?"

"Trouble." She nuzzled her cold nose pad into the pink of his ear.

"Yipe!" He jumped. The pan clanged against the linoleum. His blue eyes flicked back to her. "Uhh... That's good because I just made eggs à la floor." His ears drooped further.

The jackal turned him around, placing a paw to his questioning lips. Once his eyes fixed curiously on her, she leaned in and replaced her fingers with a gentle kiss. His ears perked for a moment, a blush creeping inside them. He relaxed into the kiss. Her tail swayed at the simple splendor of it all, the blazing of her soul quenched to embers as they smoldered on the scrubbed floor.

She looked up at him, breaking the kiss and waiting as he recovered.

After a moment, he nodded, a little in awe.

"A nice golden retriever taught me that trick."

His lips worked together for an instant. "Good trick."

Her heart soared, muzzle dipping as she smiled. "Good dog."

The golden's goofy smile returned. One ear twitched. The left one. He liked twitching that left one. His muzzle rubbed hers.

She took his paws.

He took her to bed.

They curled up together in silence, comparing pelts in the morning light.

Tess stretched out along the sheets, Erik smiling at her. Her mind drifted through this moment, this golden retriever who held her in his arms. Not just happy that he got his knot in a spot. He liked her; he even might be on his way to loving her.

She broke.

Tess Hurr didn't cry in front of anybody, not even when Dad died, not since she was six, but she cried in front of Erik. She'd spent her entire life trying not to be her mother, just a pretty toy, but she'd become her father instead, all work and no life.

He pulled her close, the softest of rumbles in his muzzle, but said nothing.

She sobbed into his chest fur. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... It's just that..." Her body shuddering, she cried against him. She'd never had anything she couldn't lose before.

He held her.

"I mean, you won't be house-sitting forever and I'm going to get transferred again to some damn place or another. I'll have to go and I don't know how I'll ever see you again! I don't want to! Really, but I have a life, a life I've worked hard for, and I—I can't live it here."

One of his paws rose out of a ripple of blankets. Gently, gently the golden cupped her muzzle in his paws. He lifted her gaze to his own, his

goofy smile stained with tears. "Then I'll live it with you."

All breath left her lungs. The world shrank to a tiny spot—just him, and her, and those blue, blue eyes. He couldn't. She wouldn't let him. It wasn't reasonable.

His paw was warm. Warm as her tears. Warm as his smile. He'd drop everything to be with me? Clearly nuts. And, as much as it would be insane to say yes, she could never say no, either.

I don't know what this is, or how the hell to integrate it... and I don't really care.

As the bed sheets held their warmth, she wriggled back under them and tackled him.

Tess Hurr was a jackal learning to love a small town dog.

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TURN OFF GRAVITY AND LET GO

WILD AND DOMESTICATED COMPANY FOR LONG HAULS THROUGH
HYPERSPACE. OUR LINEUP OF UNIQUE AND INTELLIGENT FEMME
FOXES WILL HAVE YOU FLYING BY THE SEAT OF YOUR PANTS.
THESE VIKENS ARE READY TO GRAB THE STICK AND MAKE A MESS
OF THE COCKPIT.

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WE ACCOMMODATE TYPE A7 AND ALL B DOCKING PORTS

Animal Magnetism





Whew! Another one down to the wire. It has been a busy time for Sofawolf. 2010 marks our tenth anniversary, and we are starting off our second decade with a new business structure (Sofawolf Press is now officially Sofawolf Press, Inc., which requires a lot more work than simply typing three extra letters and some punctuation!), we are giving our website a complete makeover (a major project still underway as I type this), e-book formats are close on the horizon, and we have exciting new publications in the pipeline. So, even though we are streamlining the process of pulling together each issue of Heat, everything else going on stretched out the timeline again.

I would like to give a lot of thanks to Wu Wei and Jeff Eddy, my assistant editors for this issue. Without them, this issue may not have come together in time, and it certainly would not have been nearly as good! Both helped review submissions, which got the process off to a speedier start than usual. Jeff put in a lot of time working directly with some of the authors to refine and rework big-picture issues such as story structure and character development. Wu Wei helped out more in terms of details, reviewing each piece line by line, focusing on style and logical consistency in addition to the mechanics of the English language. Together, these two took a great weight off my shoulders and allowed me to focus on other topics like arranging art and overall project management.

And of course, many thanks to all the writers, poets and artists who contributed to this issue, especially for getting their work in on time! If you, our readers, like what you see, I would encourage you to seek out more of their works via the websites included with the copyright information on the right. Check out their other works, leave comments (nice ones!), and support them financially when possible. Thank you!



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The shepherd stretched out
and vaulted over a fence at full speed,
inwardly thanking his doctor for urging
him to start running some time ago
as he raced across several back yards
in short order, hearing the angry shouting
trailing off behind him.

Dodging across a road and through
an empty lot, Rolf slowed to a trot along
an alleyway, panting, big ears pricked
to catch nearby sounds.

Nothing.

He turned his nose up, taking a long,
deep breath, and caught a whiff
of an angry Mister J drifting in
from well in the distance...
going the wrong way,
it smelled like.

Rolf grinned, and turned his attention
to the scent he had caught before.

He broke into a trot again,
following the scent of
cinnamon and cocoa...